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# The Impact of Sex Offender Registration Laws on Offenders' Reintegration Into Society

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Stephanie Rose

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Review Committee

Dr. Gregory Koehle, Committee Chairperson,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Lori Demeter, Committee Member,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. John Walker, University Reviewer,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2020

Abstract

The Impact of Sex Offender Registration Laws on Offenders' Reintegration Into Society

by

Stephanie Rose

MA, Walden University, 2015

BS, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

May 2020

## Abstract

Information related to the experiences of sex offenders required to register under the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act of 2006 is predominantly based on quantitative data, and the majority of information relates to the factors that contribute to sexual offenses, recidivism rates, and public opinion of the sex offender registry. There is a lack of research on the lived experience of sex offenders who are required to register, specifically those in rural Pennsylvania. Research is also lacking on how sex offenders and the professionals with whom they interact perceive the registry. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perspective of those who are most familiar with the registry: sex offenders, law enforcement officers, and sex offender therapists. The theoretical framework was Goffman's social construction theory. Semi-structured, in person interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of 10 individuals including registered sex offenders in rural Pennsylvania, local law enforcement officers, and therapists who offer rehabilitative services to registered sex offenders. Data were analyzed using Moustakas's approach to phenomenological analysis to identify emerging themes. The data resulted in 8 emerging themes: employment challenges, stigmatization by society, social isolation, psychological and emotional burdens, the importance of rehabilitation, broken relationships, the importance of a support system, and political powerlessness. Research about the lived experience of sex offenders required to register under SORNA can contribute to positive social change by increasing policy makers' understanding of the factors that facilitate and hinder offenders' reintegration into society.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to my amazing husband and best friend, Rob. From the beginning of this process, you have calmed my frustrations, celebrated my successes and have always pushed me to keep going. You have been just as invested in this project as I have, and I am so grateful for all the inspiration, support, and encouragement you provided during this journey. I also dedicate this study to my sons, Dean and Jace, who were born since I started my pursuit of a doctoral degree. You have always been patient with me when I had to choose work instead of enjoying time with you. Thank you for understanding the importance of my goals, and I hope this serves as an inspiration to always reach for your dreams.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act of 2006 (SORNA) is a divisive U.S. law affecting individuals convicted of a sexual offense. Under SORNA, sex offenders are required to register their personal information, including a picture, physical description, home and employer addresses, and license plate numbers to a public Internet database (Shultz, 2014). The focus of this study was on how registered sex offenders perceive the sex offender registry and how their reintegration into society has been affected by SORNA. According to Bratina (2013), the sex offender registry has not been empirically proven to enhance community safety. In addition, some researchers, such as Tewksbury, Jennings, and Zgoba (2012) argue, under SORNA, that sex offenders are incapable of escaping their past offenses and continue to undergo punishment for previous crimes even after completing their original sentence. Therefore, there was a need to examine the extent to which the sex offender registry impacts the successful reintegration of sex offenders into society.

Although other researchers have examined law enforcement officials' and community members' perceptions of SORNA, there was a lack of research on the impact of the sex offender registry on those who are the most directly affected by the legislation: convicted sex offenders. Because sex offenders are significantly impacted by SORNA, their perception of the law and personal experiences under this act offer valuable insight into its effectiveness. In contrast to other researchers who have relied on quantitative data to explore the potential negative impact of the sex offender registration requirement (e.g., Alvarez & Loureiro, 2012; Harris & Socia, 2014; Visser, Bakken & Gunter, 2013), I

used qualitative data to reveal the human perspective and lived experience of individuals required to register their personal information. I obtained information about the Pennsylvania sex offender registry directly from those individuals required to register publicly under SORNA. This study has the potential to help policy makers determine whether SORNA is the most effective means of maintaining community safety or whether amendments to this act are necessary to provide sex offenders with the means to successfully transition from prison to become productive members of society.

In the following chapters, I will provide a synopsis of the study and describe the gap in research I addressed. I present the problem statement, study purpose, and research questions and describe the theoretical foundation and research design and procedures, in addition to defining key terms. I discuss the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of key points and a transition to Chapter 2.

### **Background**

Figures compiled as part of the mandate of Pennsylvania Megan's Law indicate there were a total of 21,352 registered sex offenders in the state of Pennsylvania in 2016, which equates to a ratio of 15.6 sex offenders per 10,000 residents (Pennsylvania State Police [PSP], 2016). Each of these individuals convicted of a sexual offense in Pennsylvania is required to attend a four-phase rehabilitation program through a sex offender treatment program. These phases include facing one's history and combating denial, recognizing one's personal deviant cycle, developing empathy for one's victim, and creating a lifetime management plan to avoid reoffending (Project Point of Light

[PPOL], 2017). Not only is this required counseling designed to rehabilitate the sexual offender, but it also allows law enforcement to hold these individuals accountable for their treatment. Boccaccini, Rufino, Jackson, and Murrie (2003) maintain that “early identification of offenders who are at an increased risk for treatment noncompliance may help treatment providers direct more resources to those most at risk for program failure and subsequent re-offending” (p. 1390). Required counseling allows law enforcement to closely supervise sex offenders to ensure program compliance as they reintegrate into society.

However, punishment for sex offenders is not limited to mandated counseling and close supervision by parole officers. Instead, sex offenders are required to publicly announce their crime when re-entering society after release from prison (Shultz, 2014; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). Successful reintegration into society requires an individual to form a positive bond with the community by developing positive interpersonal relationships, maintaining gratifying employment, establishing adequate housing, and avoiding recidivism (Prescott, 2016; Visher & Travis, 2003). However, the sex offender registry causes each of these indications of successful reintegration to be impaired. Sex offenders are often stigmatized in their communities as the public nature of their offense leads to these individuals becoming labeled as *pedophiles* or *perverts* by other community members (Hunter, Lanza, Lawlor, Dyson, & Gordon, 2015; Visher & Travis, 2003).

These labels make it more difficult for offenders to find stable employment and housing and develop close relationships. Employers are often hesitant to hire a sex



offender because an individual convicted of a sexual offense must publicly register where they are employed, which could cause a loss of business as potential patrons may be discouraged from doing business with these companies (Fox, 2015). Furthermore, prospective employers often relate a sexual offense with a lack of applicable work skills or the possession of a mental deficit (Visher, Winterfield, & Coggershell, 2005). Many hiring officials search the sex offender registry before offering employment to an individual, even if that employer does not require a formal criminal background check. Because the sex offender registry is publicly available through a simple Internet search, it is free, quick, and easy to search for an individual to determine any association with a sexual offense (Nally, Lockwood, Ho, & Knutson, 2014).

In this research, I focused on the potential adverse issues that sex offenders experience during reintegration to society because of the public sex offender registry requirement. This study filled a gap in previous literature in that existing research on the potential negative connotations of the mandatory sex offender registry involved the analysis of quantitative data. Instead, this study fulfilled a call for qualitative data that offers insight into the human perspective of the phenomenon of the mandatory sex offender registry by those who are directly impacted by this requirement (Bratina, 2013; Powell, Day, Benson, Vess & Graffman, 2014; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). By offering qualitative data concerning the impact of the sex offender registration on individuals' reintegration, this study may provide policy makers with more information on the impact of SORNA on successful reintegration of sex offenders into communities.

### **Problem Statement**

Successful reintegration from prison into society requires an individual to form a positive bond with the community by developing strong relationships, maintaining acceptable employment, establishing adequate housing, and avoiding recidivism (Prescott, 2016; Visher & Travis, 2003). However, sex offenders are often stigmatized in their communities as the public nature of their offense under SORNA leads to these individuals becoming labeled as *pedophiles* or *perverts* by society (Hunter et al., 2015; Visher & Travis, 2003). These labels could potentially lead to difficulty during reintegration, which could consequently increase recidivism (Bratina, 2013; Powell et al., 2014; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). Therefore, the problems that sex offenders experience as they attempt to secure housing, employment, or positive relationships not only affect the offender but everyone in the community. Although there was well-researched quantitative data to support the importance of successful reintegration, little was known about the actual lived experience of sex offenders reintegrating into rural Pennsylvania under SORNA (see Bratina, 2013; Powell et al., 2014; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the experience of sex offenders reintegrating into society under SORNA. Successful reintegration is achieved by obtaining valid employment and housing and developing close bonds with members of society, which allows the sex offender to meet societal expectations and reduces the feelings of shame, isolation, and anxiety that are often felt during reintegration (Duwe,

2016; Prescott, 2016). As feelings of indignity, loneliness, and angst are often associated with recidivism, successful reintegration can be key to reducing the probability of recidivism among sexual offenders (Bratina, 2013; Powell et al., 2014; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). In this phenomenological study, I examined whether sex offenders, therapists, and law enforcement officers perceive that SORNA creates barriers to successful reintegration through the lens of social construction theory. Because I sought to understand the lived experience of sex offenders reintegrating under the registry requirements of SORNA, I considered a qualitative design appropriate for the study. By interviewing individuals who directly experience the barriers imposed by SORNA, I wanted to offer a deeper insight into sex offender policies and the impact that SORNA has on the ability to reintegrate into society.

### **Research Questions**

I sought to answer one central research question and two subquestions. The central question was, In what ways has SORNA impacted sex offenders' ability to successfully reintegrate into rural Pennsylvania? The subquestions were as follows:

- In what ways do law enforcement officers in rural Pennsylvania observe the impact of SORNA on successful reintegration for sex offenders?
- How do rehabilitative counselors in rural Pennsylvania perceive the impact of SORNA on successful reintegration for sex offenders?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social construction theory, developed by Erving Goffman in 1963, provides a means of examining the negative associations applied to certain populations and how

punitive legislation is justified based on these negative connotations (Parker & Aggleton, 2003). This theoretical framework suggests that individuals are classified into different groups in society, with the lowest societal group identified as deviants (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). The deviant population, which includes sex offenders, is typically blamed for society's problems and therefore receives very few societal benefits or possesses any political power (Parker & Aggleton, 2003). The stigmatization that occurs toward the deviant population is defined as an attempt to discredit the individuals who engage in behaviors that depart from societal norms and to negatively value this group in society (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, the public policy surrounding deviants can be harsh and overly disciplinary because of the stereotypes attributed to this group, such as the perception that this treatment of deviants is justified because of the inability to rehabilitate these individuals (Cucolo & Perlin, 2013; Sabatier & Weible, 2014). Research indicates that post incarceration policies that inhibit an individual from obtaining employment, forming positive community bonds, or finding housing are overly disciplinary and are more likely to cause recidivism due to the inability to successfully reintegrate into society (Hall, Wooten, & Lundgren, 2015). However, social construction theory proposes that these punitive policies are justified by society because of preconceived connotations that all sex offenders are deviants who are likely to reoffend. I will provide a more detailed explanation of the impact of social constructs on public policy in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

A qualitative research study was the most appropriate methodology for this research because the purpose was to identify the experience of sex offenders reintegrating into society under SORNA. A qualitative study allowed for the collection of data from the perspective of those directly involved with the reintegration process. According to Rudestam and Newton (2015), “the focus of phenomenological research is on what the person experiences and its expression in language that is as loyal to the lived experience as possible” (p. 43). By interviewing recently released sex offenders, rehabilitative counselors, and law enforcement officials responsible for maintaining the sex offender registry, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of SORNA on sex offenders’ reintegration and determine emerging themes.

### **Definitions**

The following words are defined as they apply to this study:

*Labeling:* The acts of attributing negative characteristics to individuals who break from societal norms and as a result become outsiders in society and devaluing these persons because of undesirable attributes (D’Alessio, Stolzenberg, & Flexon, 2015).

*Registered sex offender:* An individual convicted of a sexual offense and classified under one of three tiers that require systematic public registration to an online database (PSP, 2017).

*Reintegration:* A term that refers to the connection an individual makes with the community upon re-entering society after imprisonment. This connection is based on

maintaining employment, securing adequate housing, forming positive bonds, and avoiding recidivism (Hunter et al., 2015).

*Sex offender registration:* The requirement that any individual convicted of a sexual offense register their personal information with law enforcement officials in order to create and maintain a database of sexual offenders. Individuals convicted of a sexual offense are required to report in person periodically depending on their tier classification as well as within 3 days of any changes (PSP, 2017). These changes include but are not limited to name, residence, employment, student status, telephone number, motor vehicles including air- or watercrafts, e-mail address and social media accounts, or any physical characteristics including tattoos and/or scars (PSP, 2017).

*Stigmatization:* The placing of discrediting attributes on a group of people and spoiling their identity as a result of these attributes, causing them to be viewed as undesirable and negatively valued in society (Goffman, 1963).

### **Assumptions**

One of the primary assumptions of this phenomenological study was that interview notes would remain true to the original intentions of the participant. The goal of the study was to understand the experience of sex offenders who are reintegrating into society under SORNA. Therefore, I assumed that all notes would be transcribed and coded to preserve the original response of the participant as accurately as possible. It was assumed that open-ended interview questions would offer participants the opportunity to provide rich narratives related to their experience with integration under SORNA. This assumption was important to the study because of the reliance on themes that emerged

from these narratives to increase the understanding of the lived experience of individuals with familiarity of this phenomenon. Therefore, I assumed that the responses to the interview questions would be truthful and thorough enough to answer the research questions. Additionally, I assumed that all researcher biases would be identified and eliminated (see Yin, 2013).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This qualitative study addressed registered sex offenders, law enforcement, and sex offender therapists' perceptions of SORNA and how it impacts reintegration into society. The study was delimited because of the sample chosen, as participants included only sex offenders who have been required to register for at least one year and are living in rural Pennsylvania. Additionally, law enforcement officers and sex offender therapists are delimited to those whose professional experience involve close work with sex offenders in rural Pennsylvania for at least one year. With the research question, I sought to determine the lived experience of registered sex offenders in rural Pennsylvania, so I used purposive sampling. Only individuals who lived through reintegrating as a sex offender or worked closely with these individuals were able to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon. The sample was delimited to registered sex offenders who had been released for one year or longer because it was more likely that these individuals had a wider range of experiences relating to the phenomenon of reintegrating as a registered sex offender. Similarly, professionals who have worked with sex offenders for at least one year were more likely to have significant experience to contribute to the narrative of this phenomenon. Purposive sampling was necessary to provide the most in-

depth responses to the research question, but this sampling method decreased transferability to areas outside of rural Pennsylvania.

Delimitation was also found regarding the theoretical framework. Although social justice theory could have arguably been appropriate because of its focus on equal rights for individuals in society, it was not found to be the most suitable for this particular study. Social justice theory does rely on the belief that all members of society should be provided basic human rights, and the sex offender registry is seen by many as encroaching on the basic rights of sex offenders because of the invasion of privacy and personal information (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). However, the theory of social construction was more appropriate because of the idea of individuals in the lowest class of society being viewed as deserving harsh punishment and considered unlikely to be rehabilitated. By using social construction theory, I was able to provide a framework to view how societal perceptions impact public policy, which aligned well with this research into sex offender legislation and reintegration.

### **Limitations**

The focus of this study was on sex offender post-incarceration policies and the perceptions of how these policies impact sex offenders' reintegration into society. The study was limited by the population chosen to study, as participation in the study was determined by sex offenders who were recently released from prison and enrolled in a sex offender treatment program and professionals who work closely with registered sex offenders. I used purposive sampling to deliberately choose participants who would contribute to significant information to the study of this phenomenon (Rudestam &



Newton, 2015). Although this method of sampling allowed for a deeper understanding of the impact of SORNA on sex offender reintegration, it also limited the ability for the study to be applied to other groups outside of rural Pennsylvania. Purposive sampling also limited the representation of ethnicities, genders, ages, because participants were chosen solely based on their experience as a registered sex offender or the level of involvement with registered sex offenders their job duties required. To mitigate these potential limitations, I chose participants from as diverse backgrounds as possible while still choosing individuals who would offer deep narrative insight to answer the research question. Furthermore, any potential research biases that could be a research limitation and affect the study's results were lessened through self-reflection and bracketing (Joosten & Safe, 2014).

### **Significance**

The focus of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of the required post-incarceration registration from registered sex offenders, law enforcement, and rehabilitative counselors who work closely with sex offenders. I gained insight into this phenomenon through interviews with those directly impacted by this policy. Additionally, interviews with law enforcement and sex offender therapists offered further insight into this phenomenon. Previous research into SORNA has not included qualitative studies that offer the insights of those required to register their personal information publicly. Therefore, the information gained from these interviews offered new insight into whether SORNA is the most effective policy to

maintain community safety, avoid recidivism, and facilitate successful offender reintegration (Hunter et al., 2015; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013).

### **Positive Social Change**

This study has potential for positive social change by adding to the body of literature on sex offender reintegration and the implications of registration and notification, which could change the way sex offender legislation is viewed. An understanding of the phenomenon of sex offender reintegration could benefit sex offenders in their effort to successfully reintegrate by forming positive relationships, obtaining satisfying careers, and finding suitable living arrangements. An emphasis on the post prison reintegration experience from the point of view of those with substantial knowledge on the subject could benefit lawmakers by revealing what facilitates or hinders successful transition from prison to society. Furthermore, offering a voice to the sex offender population may encourage future research that could be used to improve the reintegration experience for sex offenders.

### **Summary**

Growing concerns over the best practices to maintain community safety from sexual predators and the belief that sex offenders are likely to recidivate required a need to further study SORNA and how this policy impacts sex offender reintegration (Cucolo & Perlin, 2013; Rubin & Rush, 2014; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). Although the connection between successful reintegration and reduced recidivism has been established, there has been no evidence that public registration reduces recidivism or increases public safety (Bratina, 2013; Powell et al., 2014; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013). Therefore, a

qualitative study of the impact of SORNA on sex offender reintegration contributed to the literature because it added to the knowledge and understanding of sex offender reintegration directly from those who are impacted by this policy.

In chapter 2, I provide a review of the theoretical framework of social construction theory (Goffman, 1963), including how it relates to the present research study and responds to the research question. I also provide a review of current literature relevant to the study of sex offender reintegration and reveal the gap in the literature on phenomenological studies that view sex offender reintegration from the perspective of sex offenders, law enforcement, and rehabilitative counselors.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

In this chapter, I review the current literature that relates to SORNA and consider the consequences of this legislation and its impact on successful reintegration and potential recidivism among sexual offenders. The literature review includes a review of the most current qualitative and quantitative studies on sex offender registration and reintegration. I explore the ways in which societal perceptions shape public policy, especially those that impact the deviant social construct (Goffman, 1963). A history of sex offender legislation is provided and shows how sex offenders have been stigmatized and targeted because of a few highly publicized cases that perpetuate negative stereotypes. Additionally, the collateral consequences of SORNA and the impact on successful reintegration are explored. I begin the chapter by describing the literature search strategy and theoretical framework for the study.

### Literature Search Strategy

I conducted the literature review using the Walden University Library and Google Scholar to obtain current, peer-reviewed literature relating to the following search terms: *Pennsylvania Megan's Law, Adam Walsh Act, sex offender, sex offender registration, sexual offender registration requirements, consequences of sex offender registration, Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act, sex offender reintegration, and sex offender rehabilitation*. Then, to ensure a holistic representation of literature on this topic, the reference lists of applicable articles were consulted to provide additional relevant resources.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social construction theory provided the theoretical framework for this study of sex offender registration and reintegration. Applied to public policy, social construction theory, developed by Erving Goffman in 1963, refers to how public policy is affected by positive or negative societal characterization of target groups (Denver, Pickett, & Bushway, 2017; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The fundamental idea of social construction theory as applied to public policy is that policy makers are influenced to provide the most advantageous policies to the more positively portrayed target populations and more punitive legislation to the negatively constructed populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This theoretical framework suggests that individuals are classified into different groups in society based on their power and social construction (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). The highest group is considered the advantaged and represents those in society with power and a positive social construction. Alternatively, those in the lowest societal group are considered deviants and include those with negative social constructs and lacking political power (Sabatier & Weible 2014). The deviant population, which includes sex offenders, receives more punitive public policy because the public usually considers this group as deserving punishment (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Social construction theory relates to labeling theory as well by suggesting that the labels that are applied to target groups influence their social construction and consequent public policies (Denver et al., 2017). Labeling an individual as a *sex offender* through mandatory registration cultivates a negative social construction because of public

stigmatization of those with this label and what the label implies (Denver et al., 2017; Harris & Socia, 2014). According to a study of 1,540 Americans with criminal records, altering the label applied to individuals with criminal records from *offender* to *person with a conviction* helped reduce the stigmatization of these individuals (Denver et al., 2017). The authors of this study found that applying a person-focused label reduced negative public perception by suggesting that these individuals were less likely to commit future crimes and more deserving of employment (Denver et al., 2017). Alternatively, a crime-first label exacerbated the perception that these individuals were violent and at high risk of recidivism (Harris & Socia, 2014).

Research suggests that mandatory sex offender registration causes an “us versus them” mentality and leaves sex offenders ostracized from the rest of society because the registration process labels them as sex offenders, and consequently society places individuals with this label in a category of those deserving harsh punishment (Rose, 2017). In another study, researchers examined the subconscious associations that society had with the terms *sex offender* and *juvenile sex offender* (Harris & Socia, 2014). In their experimental study, Harris and Socia (2014) compared 498 participants who were asked to rank their agreement with certain statements that used the sex offender label compared to a control group that was given the same statements with more neutral terms. Harris and Socia found that when the sex offender label was used, there was an increase in support for harsh public policies including required registration and residency restrictions as well as a prevailing opinion that the individuals who were labeled as sex offenders were likely to reoffend and resistant to rehabilitation (Harris & Socia, 2014).

Because of the prevailing societal connotations associated with the term *sex offender*, the registration requirement could be amplifying the negative public opinion of these individuals. However, there is a lack of research that reveals the personal experience of sex offenders as a result of mandatory registration and how the collateral consequences of SORNA create a negative social construct. My research relates to social construction theory because of the focus on the sex offender registration requirement that labels individuals who have been convicted of a sexual offense as sex offenders. According to researchers, this system is overly punitive and is based on societal perception that this group of individuals is unable to be rehabilitated and likely to re-offend (Harris & Socia, 2014; Rose, 2017; Shultz, 2014). Although research suggests that recidivism among sex offenders is low and rehabilitation should be a viable alternative to registration, negative societal perceptions of this group will result in continuing punitive legislation instead of rehabilitative alternatives because it remains politically favorable based on the tenets of social construction theory (Denver et al., 2017; Harris & Socia, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts**

#### **Society and Criminal Justice Policy**

As social construction theory suggests, criminal justice policy tends to reflect the view that offenders are unlikely to be rehabilitated and therefore need severe regulation and punitive measures (Werth, 2013). The public is one of the primary influences on legislation, and typically those with money and power dictate the policies affecting the criminal justice system (Denver et al., 2017). Based on the results of a survey of 804

registered Wisconsin voters, O'Hear and Wheelock (2016) determined that there was a disparity in opinions based on economic standing. Respondents who represented those with low economic standing suggested that criminals were capable of rehabilitation and were more likely to report direct experience with the criminal justice system through themselves or a family member. Therefore, these respondents were more prone to base their responses off their personal experience. On the other hand, respondents who identified as *upper-class* significantly favored harsher punitive policies and were more likely to base their responses on media portrayals and preconceived ideas of criminals and the criminal justice system (O'Hear & Wheelock, 2016).

One example of media portrayals' impact on public policy involved the kidnapping of Jaycee Lee Dugard in 1991. After Dugard's kidnapping, the media focused on the fact that her captor, Phillip Garrido, was still on parole and should have been supervised more closely (Miller, 2014). There was also a highly publicized case in 2006 in which sex offenders were residing in hotels near Disneyland and were permitted to do so by parole officers (Werth, 2013). These publicized cases have cemented the societal opinion that parole officers should strictly monitor parolees and that the punishment should be harsh for anyone in violation of their parole (Shultz, 2014). In several studies of public attitudes about sex offenders, it was clear that public fear of sex offenders is high, and one study even indicated that individuals reported that they would rather have a known murderer in their neighborhood than a sex offender (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017).

Society's impact on criminal justice policy can be seen through the enactment of sex offender registration laws. Based on the overwhelming public support of harsher sex



offender legislation, punitive laws are passed by legislators to appease their constituents (Werth, 2013). A clear example of political reliance on public opinion was Governor Jay Nixon's opposition to a bill to remove juveniles from the public sex offender registry. Governor Nixon opposed the bill by saying, "The leadership of the House may be ready to help violent sex offenders hide from the public and law enforcement, but their victims, and the millions who use these websites to help keep their families safe, are not" (Rose, 2017). By relying on public opinion that sex offenders are dangerous and likely to reoffend, Nixon was able to use sex offender legislation to garner political support. Following the public support for sex offender registration and notification laws that highly publicized cases garnered, lawmakers passed sex offender legislation that resulted in the total number of registrants doubling between 2005 and 2016 (Rose, 2017).

Although the criminal justice system has the responsibility of lowering recidivism rates and successfully reintegrating criminals, the punitive approach to criminal justice is often favored due to societal opinions of criminal activities (Miller, 2014). However, by not utilizing resources designed to help individuals find employment and housing, or overcome substance abuse or mental health concerns, criminals are less likely to successfully reintegrate (Day, Carson, Boni & Hobbs, 2014; Tewksbury et al., 2012). According to Rose (2017), the current sex offender laws are entirely based on public perception and that "at the expense of constitutional concerns, lawmakers appear to prefer a legislative approach that seeks to identify some predictor for sexual offending and then isolate all potential and known sex offenders from society." This separation of sex offenders from society counteracts the attempt to successfully reintegrate into society.

When reentering society, criminals already have several barriers to overcome to successfully reintegrate, and those who are unable to overcome these obstacles are more likely to violate their parole and be sent back to prison (Fox, 2016). Therefore, by separating sex offenders from society, the goal of successfully reintegrating these individuals is ignored.

Researchers suggest that the public is skeptical of sex offender treatment programs and therefore tend to advocate for harsh prison sentences and strict monitoring upon release from prison instead of using funds for rehabilitative programs (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Because current criminal justice policies do not help reintegrate offenders into society, researchers suggest that these punitive laws are intended to keep the balance of power among the upper and lower classes (Werth, 2014). If those in power are the conservative, wealthy upper-class, then harsh policies are often aimed to exclude the criminal lower classes (Denver et al., 2017). According to Rosselli & Jeglic (2017), conservatism includes a resistance to change and a temperament to preserve the existing order and balance of power, despite the resulting inequality. This can be seen through an examination of the contemporary criminal justice system, in which the relationship between the system and the criminals is not always focused on the potential for rehabilitation but rather an increased attempt for political and social exclusion (Werth, 2014). If the public maintains that punitive measures are the most appropriate way to protect the community and keep criminals off the streets, then these opinions are reflected in criminal justice policies. Researchers indicate a link between conservative attitudes and prevalence for harsh punishment, strict sentencing, and negative opinions about

rehabilitating criminals (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). However, these views affectively separate criminals from society rather than rehabilitating and reintegrating these individuals (Denver et al., 2017). Rose (2017) suggests that mandatory registration fails in its goal to prevent future crime but succeeds in shaming individuals in a punishment resembling historic chastisement that marked an offender as someone to be shunned. Although the research indicates a trend in sex offender legislation to separate the sex offender from society through harsh restrictions and public labeling, there is a gap in literature that offers the sex offenders' opinions about how the collateral consequences of SORNA, or the impacts of this legislation beyond the legal ramifications, lead to isolation from society.

### **War on Sex Offenders**

In order to understand the impact of public opinion on criminal justice policy, Yung (2009) draws comparisons between the “War on Drugs” and the recent sex offender legislation. In 1968, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) was established to combat the growing drug use and distribution problem in America. Then, the War on Drugs continued to grow during the Reagan administration because of political reaction to public fears about drug use and abuse (Pfaff, 2015). Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” anti-drug campaign continued to fuel public outcry against drug use which led to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (Yung, 2009). Drug use was a very pervasive issue at that time, so the government could justify spending \$1.7 billion to target this problem and develop a mandatory minimum penalty for drug-related crimes (Pfaff, 2015). During the

Clinton Administration, the War on Drugs even led to the passage of a law that allowed the use of the death penalty for non-homicidal cases (Yung, 2009).

Scholars argue that the War on Drugs was largely the result of propaganda and myths about the dangers of drug use (Hoppe, 2016). President Nixon perpetuated a growing disdain for drugs and drug users by declaring drugs were “public enemy number one,” which allowed those who were convicted of drug-related crimes to be targeted and harshly penalized (Yung, 2009). By using propaganda, negative media portrayal of drug users and distributors, and myths that purchasing drugs was aiding in world terrorism, the War on Drugs allowed criminal justice policies to go beyond typical techniques (Rose, 2017). Because the public targeted drug use as the prevailing social and criminal problem at that time, lawmakers reacted by enacting harsh anti-drug legislation that encroached on civil liberties and resulted in an overwhelming increase in incarceration (Hoppe, 2016). Yung (2009) argues that although the statistical evidence did not support the justification of such severe anti-drug legislation, the government still spent \$2.2 trillion to enact policies that led to two million individuals being arrested for non-violent drug crimes every year.

Current sex offender legislation mirrors the war on drugs so closely that scholars have dubbed this a “War on Sex Offenders” (Hoppe, 2016; Rose, 2017). With the enactment of the Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act (AWA) and the shift of sex offender policy as a state issue to a federally mandated issue, sex crime policy became a war against sex offenders (Rose, 2017). Similarities between the war on drugs and the war on sex offenders include the increased use of resources to address a growing problem

perpetuated by public outcry of a criminal problem and demonization of a targeted social group. The first comparison, the allocation of government resources, can be seen in the establishment of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking Office (SMART) which is responsible for implementing SORNA (Yung, 2009). In order to successfully enforce SORNA, \$381 million was allocated to operate SMART and hire US marshals to oversee the enforcement of the Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act (Rose, 2017). A study of California's sex offender registry indicated that in order to maintain a sex offender registry, local law enforcement is significantly burdened by the financial obligations and the considerable time that goes into registration, updates, and enforcement procedures (Chaudhuri, 2017). Because the prevailing public belief is that sex offenders require harsh legislation, funds are allocated for monitoring and tracking these individuals rather than using funds for treatment programs to help rehabilitate sex offenders (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017).

Another significant association between the past anti-drug legislation and the current sex offender legislation is the reliance on myths about sex offenders as a tool to garner support for harsh policies. According to Rose (2017), the prevailing myth about sex offenders is that of "stranger danger" that implies a sex offender is waiting in the bushes to attack an unknown victim. However, over 90 percent of sexual crimes are committed by a friend or family member of the victim and sexual predators that abduct unknown children do not represent the norm (Yung, 2009). Because the media focuses on the rare cases of sexual predators, these events have come to influence the legislation affecting sex offenders (Rose, 2017). Another common assumption among politicians and

public officials is that sex offenders are likely to reoffend (Mustaine, Tewksbury, Connor & Payne, 2014), but research suggests that sex offenders actually have a low level of recidivism ranging from 5.1% to 10.3% (Ackerman, Sacks & Osier, 2013; Miller, 2014; Zgoba et al., 2015). Recidivism studies indicate that SORNA does not achieve its goal of reducing recidivism and that there is no statistical significance between recidivism among individuals who are required to register and those that are not. In fact, one study revealed that harsh registration requirements that keep offenders isolated from society are more likely to decrease public safety because they deny offenders the tools they need to lead successful, law-abiding lives, such as providing an offender with treatment, stability, and positive support networks (Rose, 2017). However, because of the media attention surrounding child abduction cases and the prevailing social construct that deems sex offenders are worthy of harsh punishments, communities and public officials maintain that a sex offender registry is necessary because tracking sexual offenders will prevent these individuals from reoffending (Miller, 2014; Shultz, 2014).

Sex offender myths often result from the term *sex offender*. Using one term to represent the wide-ranging list of offenses that require registration as a sex offender establishes a singular population instead of a diverse group of different crimes and risk levels (Rose, 2017). Because of public perception and SORNA laws, sex offenders are faced with cultural stereotypes that become ingrained in their daily lives and make it difficult to lead meaningful lives that contribute to society (Bensel & Sample, 2017). While the public perception of a sex offender is that of a depraved child molester, there are many other crimes that are included on the sex offender registry, that arguably do not

constitute a future sexual threat, such as public urination, purchasing tobacco or alcohol for a minor, possessing child pornography, or taking a child across state lines when a custody hearing is pending (Pfaff, 2016). However, SORNA legislation requires registration as a sexual predator for a wide variety of crimes with no distinction between an individual's threat level to society or likeliness to reoffend (Rose, 2017). The homogenous nature of SORNA contributes to society's belief that all sex offenders are dangerous, likely to reoffend, and in need of registration requirements and more strict surveillance than non-sexual offenders including robbers, drug dealers, and murders (Bensel & Sample, 2017).

The myths about sex offenders and subsequent targeting of these individuals was perpetuated through the 2004 prime-time television show, *To Catch a Predator*, which publicly aired sting operations that lured strangers into attempting to have sexual relations with minors (Pfaff, 2016). Now, the term *sex offender* has come to be associated with the idea of depraved predators that cannot help but to prey on children. Although the sex offender population is diverse and represents a variety of non-sexual and non-threatening crimes, the sex offender label still portrays any individual required to publicly register to be viewed as an enemy. Resembling the War on Drugs, war rhetoric has been used to target sex offenders, such as 2003 presidential candidate Bill Richardson who pronounced that "New Mexico is declaring war against sexual predators" (Yung, 2009). By using this ruthless language and perpetuating sex offenders as an isolated enemy group, public officials foster the myth that sex offenders are deserving of harsh legislation.

**Punitive vs. Rehabilitative Policies**

The mission statement of the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole (PBPP) is to “promote public safety, utilizing sound decision making practices that include evidence-based approaches, employing effective methods to aid offenders in reentering society and to reduce recidivism, addressing the needs of crime victims, and improving county adult probation and parole services” (PBPP, 2018). Based on this mission statement, there exists a duality among the goals of parole between the law enforcement aspect to supervise and regulate parolees and the social work component that aims to provide successful offender reentry and prevent recidivism (Werth, 2013).

Based on the conflicting nature of criminal justice between punitive and rehabilitative, law enforcement officials tend to embrace a ‘tough love’ approach to their roles by focusing on thorough supervision, prohibiting involvement with other offenders, spatial restrictions, and excessive prohibitions that interfere with an offender’s ability to successfully reintegrate into society (Armbrorst, 2017). Werth (2013) conducted a study of California parole officers to gain insight into their opinions about their parolees and determined that most view parolees as dangerous, troublesome, and unlikely to change. The parole officers also tend to view parolees as inherently dishonest and trying to conceal behaviors that violate their parole. Therefore, parole officers are often wary of parolees who seem to be upholding the rules of their parole and try to ‘catch them in a lie’ because they assume these individuals are being dishonest or manipulative. Additionally, most parole officers expressed skepticism about the ability to reform criminals, suggesting that a criminal has already broken the law once and will most likely



repeat this behavior (Werth, 2013). Some parole officers noted that rehabilitative programs are a ‘waste of taxpayer money’ because criminals are unable to be rehabilitated. While others suggested that rehabilitation should be the goal of parole officers, they felt that the current criminal justice system was still primarily focused on punishment (Werth, 2013).

Despite the prevailing law enforcement policies regarding sex offenders in the United States, one study from the United Kingdom indicated that those closely involved with managing sex offenders did not agree with the stereotypes of sex offenders felt that the sex offender registries contained too much personal information and should not be available to the public (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). This study also determined that law enforcement officials and rehabilitative counselors who were directly involved with the treatment of sex offenders often held more positive views about these individuals than other law enforcement officials who did not work closely with sex offenders (Higgins & Rolfe, 2017). Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) suggest that the more knowledge an individual has about sex offenders and the collateral consequences of SORNA, the more positive their treatment and attitudes about sex offenders will become. This study surveyed experienced professionals in the United Kingdom who work closely with sex offenders and determined that there were fewer negative stereotypes than those who did not work directly with sex offender treatment. It also found that individuals who do not base their knowledge of sex offenders on media coverage or societal perceptions were more likely to favor rehabilitation than harsh registration laws (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). While this study found a correlation between the amount of research-based knowledge of sexual

offenders and positive views of these individuals, there has been little research conducted in the United States to determine whether a similar pattern exists.

In the United States, law enforcement policies are typically based more on assumptions and social perceptions than through research or policy evaluations. However, researchers suggest that rehabilitation can lower recidivism rates (Fox, 2015; Handler, 2011; Kim, Benekos & Merlo, 2016; Shultz, 2014). Higgins and Rolfe (2017) found that probation and parole officers relied on the social construct applied to sex offenders even before meeting the individual offender. These preconceived social constructs led to parole officers treating sex offenders like they are dangerous and highly likely to reoffend and focusing more on punitive measures than rehabilitative. The prevailing social constructs have led to strict regulation and monitoring as the normal approach to parole sex offenders rather than on treatment and support services (Bitna, Benekos & Merlo, 2016). The premise of this punitive policy is that sex offenders know that they are being watched, so they do not break any rules out of fear of going back to prison for a parole violation. However, these punitive practices often lead to parole officers strictly supervising their parolees in order to catch criminals breaking the rules of their parole rather than helping them transition to society (Bitna et al., 2016; Werth, 2013). Werth (2013) interviewed California parole officers who favor punitive policies, and suggested that punitive legislation is necessary because, “prison is not about vocational rehab, it’s about punishing people ... You have to break their spirit to help them. Rather than giving them treatment, give them 12 or 14 hours of hard labor a day. It’s like a wild horse, you have to break it. That’s the way to motivate and help people.”

However, these punitive policies do not offer rehabilitation to help the offender overcome any issues that may have led to the criminal activity, such as mental illness or substance abuse (Prescott, 2016). Additionally, researchers indicate that offenders are most likely to recidivate due to failure to obtain financial stability, adequate housing, or develop positive support systems (Ackerman et al., 2013; Bratina, 2013; Prescott, 2016). By relying on harsh punishment and strict regulation, law enforcement officials often make it more challenging for offenders to find employment and develop strong community support (Bratina, 2013) and therefore are failing to prevent recidivism.

Law enforcement and society's view of parolees as dishonest and manipulative also helps to justify the need for a sex offender registry. The logic is that if people who have already been convicted of a sexual crime are on a list available to law enforcement and the public, they will be deterred from committing subsequent sexual crimes, which allows the registration requirement to be upheld as constitutionally allowable (Rose, 2017). However, a survey of sexual abuse survivors found that they believe that a public sex offender registry creates a false sense of security and that it does little to prevent a sex offense from occurring (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). But, the prevailing belief among policymakers is that a person's criminal past is more dangerous to society than their current threat level, which blurs the line between punishment and prevention of recidivism because it allows for continued punitive statutes beyond the period of incarceration (Rose, 2017). Although the intention of the public registry is to improve public safety, researchers suggest that only 17 percent of the public has actually viewed a

sex offender website in an effort to take preventative measures based on the information they obtained (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017).

### **History of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act**

The Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA) is a highly divisive law that has been gaining professional and media attention due to highly publicized rape and murder cases involving repeat sexual offenders (Ackerman et al., 2013; Chaudhuri, 2017; Melcher, 2012; Rubin & Rush, 2014; Shultz, 2014). The original purpose of the sex offender registration, enacted in the 1990s, was to protect children and keep communities safe by warning the public about high risk and dangerous sexual offenders. The first law affecting individuals accused of a sexual offense was The Jacob Wetterling Crimes against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act. This law was passed in 1994 after 11-year-old, Jacob Wetterling, was abducted in 1989. This law created a requirement that all individuals found guilty of a sexual crime register their address with local law enforcement agencies so their location could be tracked by law enforcement officials (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Then, as a result of the rape and murder of Megan Kanka by her neighbor, a repeat sex offender, the Wetterling Act was amended to include Megan's Law in 1996. This amendment allowed the sex offender information that was registered with local law enforcement to be disseminated publicly, as well as requiring states to have procedures in place to inform the community about convicted sex offenders residing in the area (Ackerman et al., 2013; Levenson et al., 2007). In 2006, this law was once again amended to the Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act. This new legislation was the result of the kidnapping and murder of television

host, John Walsh's, son in 1981, which spurred lobbying efforts by Walsh to federalize sex offender legislation (Melcher, 2012). Under the Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act (AWA), the federal government required each state to establish a system of public registration of sex offenders under the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), or lose state grant money for non-compliance (Iacono, 2012; Rose, 2017). Originally, the Department of Justice intended sex offender registration to be "a system for monitoring and tracking sex offenders following their release into the community," but public hype led to increased registration requirements and a more highly publicized registry (Rose, 2017). The heightened registration requirement also meant that many states increased the type of crime that warranted public registration to individuals whose crime does not classify them as a sexually violent predator. These crimes include individuals charged with public urination, adult prostitution, purchasing alcohol or tobacco for a minor, sexual activity in view of a minor, child abduction by a parent, and public indecency (Rose, 2017; Visgaitis, 2011). According to Judge Mary Katherine Huffman, SORNA "amplifies just about every component of prior federal mandates. It casts a bigger net, imposing its mandate on a wider range of individuals and offenses (Rose, 2017). Therefore, SORNA offers restrictions beyond its originally intended goal of providing a system to monitor and track sexual offenders.

**History of SORNA in Pennsylvania.** On December 20, 2011, Pennsylvania's Megan's Law was amended by Act 111 to bring Pennsylvania into SORNA compliance under the new Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act federal standards. According to the Pennsylvania General Assembly, there is a multitude of crimes that now require

registration as a sexual offender. Sexual crimes, such as rape (18 Pa. C.S. § 3121), statutory sexual assault (18 Pa. C.S. § 3122.1), involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, including anal sex between human beings, sexual intercourse with animals, or penetration of the genitals with any foreign object (18 Pa. C.S. § 3123); institutional sexual assault, whereby the offender is an employee of a licensed residential facility serving youth or mental health practitioners who use physical, intellectual, moral, emotional or psychological force with the intent of eliciting sexual behavior (18 Pa. C.S. § 3124.2), aggravated/ non-aggravated indecent assault (18 Pa. C.S. § 312; Pa. C.S. § 3126), incest (18 Pa. C.S. § 4302), and prostitution (18 Pa. C.S. § 5902). Other non-sexual offenses include kidnapping of a minor, interference with custody of children, which can include a child's parents if acting contrary to a court order (18 Pa. C.S. § 2904), public indecency (18 Pa. C.S. § 2910), writing, drawing, copying or printing obscene materials depicting a minor (18 Pa. C.S. § 5903), corruption of minors through the purchase of tobacco, alcohol, firearms, pornography or any material which is prohibited to minors (18 Pa. C.S. § 6301), possessing, viewing, or disseminating child pornography (18 Pa. C.S. § 6312), or invasion of privacy (18 Pa. C.S. § 7507.1). Additionally, with the passing of the Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act, new offenses came about relating to sex offender registration requirements. Specifically, these offenses include noncompliance of registration requirements or assisting a sex offender in alluding law enforcement by withholding information or not notifying law enforcement about sex offenders' noncompliance or provides false information about a sex offender (18 Pa. C.S. § 3130). Therefore, an individual convicted of any of the offenses mentioned above can be

convicted of a subsequent felony for failure to comply with registration requirements that can last a lifetime (Rose, 2017). Furthermore, the failure to receive notice of registration requirement from the Pennsylvania State Police is not a defense against failure to comply with registration requirements, which disallows sex offenders from claiming they were unaware of the requirement to register or update registration information within the specified three business days (PSP, 2018).

As a result of SORNA, individuals charged with a sexual offense in Pennsylvania are now required to report personal information including current photograph, residential and work address, vehicle description and identification, physical description including scars and tattoos, current photograph, and any social media affiliations (Ackerman et al., 2013; Iacono, 2011; PSP, 2018). Depending on the severity of the crime, Pennsylvania residents convicted of a sexual offense are assigned to one of three tiers. The lowest tier, Tier 1, requires sex offenders to register annually for 15 years. Tier 2 entails a 25-year semiannual registration, and Tier 3 mandates a lifetime registration four times a year (PSP, 2018). The amendment to the previous Pennsylvania Megan's Law changed the registration requirements from 10 years and lifetime, effective December 19, 2012 (PSP, 2018). If an offender has a change in name, residence, employment, school enrollment, vehicle, telephone, temporary lodging, or any internet identifiers including email, he or she is required to appear in person to notify law enforcement officials within three business days (PSP, 2018). If no changes occur, an offender is still obligated to meet their mandated registration requirements based on their tiered classification or risk new felony charges (Newburn, 2010; PSP, 2018). Additionally, to adhere to notification policies set

forth by AWA, email notices are enabled for Pennsylvania residents to track identified addresses and receive announcements when a sex offender lists an address in a radius of the identified address. According to Rose (2017), it is also important to note that each of the registration requirements involved with SORNA occurs after the offender has been released from prison and has therefore served his or her sentence in full.

Since the enactment of Megan's Law in 1995, there have been several updates and amendments to sex offender legislation in Pennsylvania including Megan's Law II in 2000, Megan's Law III in 2004, and Megan's Law IV or SORNA which became effective on December 20, 2012. In July of 2017 the Pennsylvania Supreme Court case of *Commonwealth v. Muniz* determined that SORNA was unconstitutional due to violations of the ex-post facto clauses of the State and Federal Constitutions (Pasqualini, 2017). In this Supreme Court Case, the offender was convicted of a sexual offense in 2007 and was sentenced to a ten-year registration requirement. However, because his sentence was not finished before SORNA was enacted, his original sentence was increased from 10 years to a lifetime registration (Ward, 2017). Before this ruling, individuals whose offense occurred before December 20, 2012, or the enactment of SORNA in Pennsylvania, and were sentenced under previous Megan's Law requirements, were retroactively punished under the new provisions of SORNA. Therefore, if they had been sentenced to a ten-year registration period under the previous Megan's Law, the new legislation could require a 15-year, 25 year, or lifetime registration depending on the nature of the crime and the details of the sentencing. Individuals who were impacted by the unconstitutional provisions of SORNA are currently waiting for the Attorney General to issue a statute to



remove applicable offenders at the time of this writing, which would remove more than ten thousand individuals from the sex offender registry (Pasqualini, 2017). However, the case has been met with resistance from those who favor the harsh punitive laws already in place. The Pennsylvania District Attorney's Association (PDAA) challenged the July ruling that SORNA was unconstitutional, but the US Supreme Court denied the petition citing that SORNA because it imposed retroactive punishment, was indeed unconstitutional (Vaughn, 2018).

In response to the Supreme Court ruling, the PDAA is recommending a return to the previous version of Megan's Law so that offenders who were sentenced before SORNA would still be covered. If this were to happen, only those sex offenders who had completed the terms of their original sentencing would be removed from the registry instead of any sex offender who had been sentenced before December 20, 2012 (PDAA, 2017). Having a sex offender registry is necessary, according to PDAA Communications Chair Dave Freed, because "sex offenders are high risk and they recidivate. They are dangerous and they prey on our most vulnerable." In December of 2017, new legislation was passed by the House Judiciary Committee that would reinstate Megan's Law, but also lessened some of the more punitive restrictions enacted under SORNA (PDAA, 2017). For example, sex offenders sentenced to a lifetime registration requirement would have the option to petition to be removed from the registry after 25 years, and offenders would be allowed to update their information by phone if they meet certain compliance requirements (Ward, 2017). The bill to reenact previous versions of Megan's Law was approved by the House in December 2017, but at the time of this writing still awaits a

ruling by the state Senate (Vaughn, 2018). Although the new sex offender restrictions are supported by the PDAA, PSP, the Sex Offender Assessment Board (SOAB), and the Office of Victim Advocates (OVA), opponents of sex offender registration laws suggest that this law creates a false sense of security and that there has not been enough research into whether registration actually keeps people safe and whether the punitive nature of such laws are constitutional due to the collateral consequences (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017; Ward, 2017). Rose (2017) suggests that even if an individual can be removed from the public registry, there is nothing to remove that individual from third party websites and undo any collateral consequences already experienced as a result of being labeled as a sex offender. With potentially significant pending changes to SORNA laws pending, it is important to determine how sex offenders view the collateral consequences of these laws and the impact these changes could have on their situations. Because these changes are occurring at present, no research exists that identifies how sex offenders feel about what the implications of these changes could mean to the collateral consequences they experience.

### **Controversy Surrounding SORNA**

The objective of SORNA is to keep children and communities safe from sexual offenders. However, criminal cases that involve strangers abducting children are rare, and SORNA policies are often based on a few highly publicized cases involving child abduction by sexual predators (Ackerman et al., 2013; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Rubin & Rush, 2014; Shultz, 2014). In fact, research does not support that requiring sex offenders to register will increase community safety (Ackerman et al., 2013, Bratina,

2013). However, SORNA fails to address the fact that most sexual assault cases are committed by a familiar member or person who is close to the victim and not a stranger (Ackerman et al., 2013; Bratina, 2013). Furthermore, evidence suggests that many sexual offenses are committed by a first-time offender, which reduces the need for a sex offender registry and the notion that offenders are likely to reoffend (Bitna et al., 2016).

Other countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, and Japan also maintain a sex offender database. However, these sex offender registries are only used to aid law enforcement and the public is not granted free access to this information (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Instead, the United Kingdom only allows victims to be notified about the residence of their perpetrators (Rose, 2017). Similarly, the sex offender laws in Canada only allow law enforcement to obtain access to the sex offender registry through formal permission from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and in order to be placed on the sex offender registry, there must be a clear argument made about the threat that the individual poses to society beyond their original victim (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). The sex offender legislation utilized by these countries maintains the intention for community safety through law enforcement observation without relying on labeling and public registration as a sex offender.

### **Recidivism Rates Among Sex Offenders**

The prevailing opinion of sex offenders is that they are likely to reoffend (Denver et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2015; Harris, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2014); however current studies do not support these claims. Zgoba et al. (2015) examined data from 1,789 sex offenders and found that the sexual recidivism rate was only 5% in the 5 years after

release from prison and 10% in the 10 years after release from prison. This study also found that the sex offender classification scheme that organizes offenders into three tiers did not accurately determine recidivism risks as tier 2 offenders were found to have a higher recidivism rate than tier 3 offenders (Zgoba et al., 2015). Since SORNA has been enacted, researchers have studied the impact of registration on reducing incidents of rape and have found that sixty percent had no statistically significant decreases in sexual assault, ten percent saw an increase in rape incidents, and thirty percent showed a decrease (Craun, Simmons, & Reeves, 2011). Additionally, there has been no empirical evidence to prove that a sex offender registry increases community safety (Bratina, 2013; Chaudhuri, 2017; Craun et al., 2011). These results are significant because they indicate that the current sex offender classification scheme and required registration based on tier placement is not an effective way to predict recidivism and protect the public against those likely to commit a sexual offense.

### **Recidivism and Reintegration**

Although the original intention of SORNA policies under the Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act was to reduce recidivism of sexual offenders, research indicates that public registration and notification policies could actually lead to an increase in repeat offenses due to the failure to successfully reintegrate into the community (Day et al., 2014; Tewksbury et al., 2012). Of any class of felons, society tends to stigmatize sex offenders the most, so reintegration can be challenging for these individuals (Fox, 2015; Prescott, 2016). As a result, sex offenders often experience isolation, shame, depression, and apprehension as a result of the public registration

requirement (Bitna et al., 2016). In order to successfully reintegrate, an offender must conform to societal conventions by securing adequate housing, maintaining rewarding employment, forming positive interpersonal relationships, and avoiding recidivism (Day et al., 2014; Duwe, 2016; Hunter et al., 2015). Although there is a well-researched association between successful reintegration and decreased recidivism rates, SORNA causes difficulty in maintaining this connection (Hunter et al., 2015; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013; Visher & Travis, 2003). Sex offenders are often stigmatized in society as the public nature of their offense leads to these individuals becoming labeled as *pedophiles* or *perverts* by their communities (Hunter et al., 2015, Visher & Travis, 2003) even if their offense did not involve minors or sexual assault (Rose, 2017; Visgaitis, 2011). As social construction theory and labeling theory suggest, the way society views a group is an important consideration to how a group sees themselves (Rose, 2017). Bensch and Sample (2017) suggest that because society views and treats sex offenders as though they are dangerous and violent criminals, sex offenders are more likely to see themselves as outcasts from society and act accordingly. Additionally, these negative labels caused by the sex offender registry can have a profound impact on recidivism, as the shame and isolation caused by attributing negative labels to an individual has been found to increase offender reoffense (Bitna et al., 2016; Prescott, 2016).

### **Rehabilitation**

One of the primary controversies surrounding SORNA is the difficulty in reintegrating into society because upon release from prison, other felons get to transition back into society without publicly acknowledging their offense, but individuals convicted

of a sexual offense are labeled as sex offenders and are consequently unable to disassociate themselves from their criminal past (Hall et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2015). The existing sex offender laws cause a punitive reintegration process that relies on shaming and labeling the offender rather than on rehabilitation and focusing on successful reentry (Hall et al., 2015). According to Braithwaite and Mugford (1994), there are two models of punishment for an individual convicted of an offense, reintegrating shaming and disintegrative shaming. Reintegrative shaming focuses on condemning the offense but respecting the individual convicted of that offense and rehabilitating that person to allow for successful reintegration. Alternatively, disintegrative shaming relies on stigmatizing an individual associated with a crime and focusing on shaming and isolating that individual (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). The mandatory public registration under SORNA applies the sex offender label that isolates these individuals from society and leaves them with feelings of disgrace and indignity (Tewksbury et al., 2012). Legislation that limits an offender's capability of forming positive social bonds, becoming employed, or obtaining adequate housing, such as the conditions of SORNA, are overly disciplinary and can result in a failure to reintegrate into society (Hall et al., 2015). Additionally, SORNA is based on the idea that all sex offenders are likely to reoffend even though most sex offenders do not fit these stereotypes (Handler, 2011; Shultz, 2014). If these individuals are provided with the necessary rehabilitation and tools to successfully reintegrate into society, they are unlikely to reoffend (Hall et al., 2015; Shultz, 2014). Handler (2011) suggests that sex offender laws that require public notification are too harsh and are an excessive response

to public fear of sex offenders. When each sex offender is convicted, he or she is required to be evaluated by a Sexual Offender Assessment Board (SOAB) in order to determine their likelihood to reoffend and the severity of their crime (PSP, 2017). However, regardless of the determinations made by the SOAB, all convicted sex offenders are still required to publicly register, which does not take into consideration an offenders' history or likelihood of reoffence (Melcher, 2012; Rose, 2017).

Researchers have suggested alternatives to SORNA that include a more primary focus on rehabilitation rather than the current punitive legislation. Duwe (2015) determined that offering treatment to rehabilitate sex offenders during the reintegration process is more successful than harsh disciplinary measures that rely on publicly categorizing sex offenders, which creates a stigma that follows the offender. Instead, sex offender legislation should rely on providing resources and behavioral treatment rather than public notification, which leads to feelings of shame and isolation among offenders (Handler, 2011). Fox (2015) conducted a research study that collected qualitative data from individuals involved in Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA). This program uses community members who volunteer to provide a support system for offenders during their release from prison and reintegration into the community. This study used qualitative data to determine that because community members were involved in the rehabilitation process, sex offenders felt less isolated by society, less stigmatized, and less lonely (Fox, 2015). By allowing members of society to interact with sex offenders and help with treatment, it could disavow negative stereotypes that all sex offenders are predatory and dangerous (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Another alternative to

the current reintegration process is the Good Lives Model. This program focuses on rehabilitation and treatment for the offender rather than on harsh punishment. Shultz (2014) suggested that using the Good Lives Model will ultimately result in a decrease in recidivism and help sex offenders become contributing members of society.

Each individual convicted of a sexual offense in Pennsylvania is required to attend a sex offender treatment program. This rehabilitative program relies on cognitive behavioral therapy, which focuses on thoughts and actions that lead to inappropriate behaviors and helps offenders develop competencies in recognizing internal and external risks in order to maintain appropriate behaviors (Kim et al., 2016). The four phases included in the rehabilitation plan include facing one's history and combating denial, recognizing one's personal deviant cycle, developing empathy for one's victim, and creating a lifetime management plan to avoid re-offending (PPOL, 2017). This treatment method is found to be successful in reducing recidivism among treated offenders (Kim et al., 2016). Although this required counseling is designed to rehabilitate the sexual offender, it often becomes a means for law enforcement to closely supervise sex offenders to ensure program compliance as they reintegrate into society. Parole officers often attend group therapy sessions to manage their sex offender caseloads and to 'make their presences felt' (Werth, 2014). While this can be helpful to parole officers to assess their parolees to determine who is at risk of reoffending, it also creates a harsh regulatory environment rather than a rehabilitative atmosphere (Kim et al., 2016). Furthermore, after completion of the sex offender treatment program, individuals should be considered rehabilitated and able to rejoin the community with the same restrictions as other felons,



but the overly punitive requirements of SORNA add a lifetime of punishment for these individuals (Hall et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2015)

### **Collateral Consequences of SORNA**

Reintegrating into society after a prison sentence can be challenging, as sex offenders face societal discrimination and personal defeat, but the transition is made more difficult because of collateral consequences of SORNA. These collateral consequences include, but are not limited to financial instability, negative emotions, inability to adhere to societal conventions, and lack of strong positive support systems (Ackerman et al., 2013; Bratina, 2013, Prescott, 2016). Not only can the labeling associated with the sex offender registry lead to increased recidivism (Bensel & Sample, 2017), but the registry requirement also limits the opportunities for offenders to rejoin the labor market, influences the positive relationships held by offenders, and makes it increasingly difficult to obtain safe housing and strong community membership (Ackerman et al., 2013; Miller, 2014). Research suggests that labeling a person as a *sex offender* isolates that person from society and prohibits him or her from reintegrating into the community because of the shame and stigmatization associated with the label (Higgins & Rolfe, 2017).

A significant collateral consequence can be seen in the impact that SORNA has on an offender's ability to obtain employment. A study of 138 sex offenders found that over half had lost jobs due to their placement on the public sex offender list (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Once an individual is convicted of a sexual offense, there are many professions that are banned, as sex offenders are not allowed to work with minors, the elderly or an individual with a disability (Bensel & Sample, 2017). Even jobs that are

permitted for individuals with a sexual offense can be very difficult to obtain because of employer bias against these offenders (Ackerman et al., 2013). Fox (2015) suggested that the hiring of a sex offender could potentially lead to uneasiness for other employees or customers. Research confirms the importance of obtaining employment for successful reintegration into society, but employers are often reluctant to hire sex offenders because these individuals are required to publicly register their employment address. Therefore, removing the sex offender label that results from the public sex offender registry might increase the opportunity for employment (Ackerman et al., 2013). The association between employers and the sex offender registry could lead to a loss of business as potential patrons may be discouraged from doing dealing with these companies (Fox, 2015). Additionally, public perception of sex offenders can cause considerable difficulty for these individuals to find employment. Society often views sex offenders as lacking applicable work skills or possessing a mental deficit (Fox, 2015; Visser et al., 2005). Because the sex offender registry is publicly available through a simple Internet search, many employers consult the registry before making an employment offer, even those that do not conduct a formal background check (Nally et al., 2014). The stigmatization and connotation associated with being labeled a sex offender is often what excludes an individual from employment, and not just that the person committed a sexual offense but that they are associated with the negative stereotypes of a sex offender (Higgins & Rolfe, 2017). Even if sex offenders can find employment after their release from prison, it is often performing manual labor jobs for a lower salary than the individual held prior to employment (Alvarez & Loureiro, 2012). However, if an offender joins the labor market

after being released from prison, there is a reduction in the shame and isolation that results from unemployment, which helps the offender successfully reintegrate into the community (Miller, 2014; Prescott, 2016). Finding satisfying employment not only provides the offender with a necessary income to pay for court costs and parole supervision fees, but also helps contribute to feelings of self-worth, and provide structure to manage positive societal behaviors (Miller, 2014; Visher et. al, 2013).

The collateral consequences of SORNA are not only felt by the registered sex offender but often by their family members as well (Rose, 2017; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). According to a survey conducted by Rose (2017), 584 family members of registered sex offenders were negatively impacted by public sex offender registration and often faced harassment, stigmatization, or the inability to continue positive relationships with the registered sex offender. Sex offenders face harsh restrictions which negatively impacts their relationship with their children and other family members (Higgins & Rolfe, 2017). Depending on the severity of the crime, registered sex offenders are often restricted from attending school functions, assisting with any clubs or teams, driving children to or from events, or participating in public events including Halloween celebrations (Higgins & Rolfe, 2017). Family members of sex offenders also report feeling stigmatization, depression, stress, frustration, and anger as a result of being associated with an individual on the public registry (Rose, 2017).

Upon release, sex offenders are faced with legal, social, and personal barriers which could lead to reintegration failure. Obtaining valid employment and housing or developing close bonds with members of society allows the sex offender to meet societal

expectations, which reduces the feelings of shame, isolation, and anxiety that are often felt during reintegration (Duwe, 2016; Prescott, 2016). As feelings of humiliation, isolation, and anxiety are often associated with recidivism, successful reintegration can be fundamental in reducing the probability of recidivism among sexual offenders. However, the collateral consequences associated with SORNA make it difficult to achieve successful reintegration. If an offender is willing and able to transform his image to one that mainstream society approves of, he or she has more likelihood of reintegration success because obtaining employment and maintaining strong community bonds is often aligned with creating positive social perceptions (Ackerman et al., 2013). However, despite the attempts of an individual convicted of a sexual offense to be viewed as a legitimate and productive member of society, it is often not enough to counteract the social construct ascribed by negative stereotypes and prevailing societal perceptions (Higgins & Rolfe, 2017).

### **Summary**

Because the sex offender registry continues to be a prominent factor in public policy and criminal justice legislation, there is an abundance of research that has been conducted on this subject. Studies have explored the connection between the sex offender registry and recidivism (Harris & Socia, 2014; Shultz, 2014; Rose, 2017), public opinion about registry requirements (Denver et al., 2017; Harris & Cudmore, 2016; Harris & Socia, 2014; O'Hear & Wheelock, 2016), the effect of the media on sex offender legislation (Miller, 2014), the impact of SORN on the frequency of sex crimes (Levenson & Zgoba, 2015), the economic and racial composition of the registered sex

offender population (Harris, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2014; Levenson & Harris, 2012; O'Hear & Wheelock, 2016), law enforcement officer's opinion of SORN policies (Mustaine, et al., 2015; Tewksbury, 2012; Tewksbury et al., 2012). Because sex offender registration is such a divisive issue in the media and politics today, there has been research that explores this subject from multiple perspectives, including victims, police officers, community members, and legislators. However, it is important to understand the effect of the sex offender registry on sex offenders, who are the most significantly impacted by this legislation. Researchers suggest that failure to successfully reintegrate into society has been linked to increased recidivism (Day et al., 2014; Tewksbury et al., 2012). However, little qualitative research exists to determine how public registration affects reintegration from the perspective of the sex offender (Bitna et al., 2016; Fox, 2015; Prescott, 2016). Although there has been extensive research about sex offender registration, no research has been conducted that explores the lived experience of sex offenders in rural Pennsylvania. This research gap is predominant because the phenomenon of sex offenders in Pennsylvania is unique due to the 2018 Senate decision that the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act is unconstitutional. Additionally, no research exists that explores the same population of sex offenders, such as those living in rural Pennsylvania, from multiple perspectives such as law enforcement, rehabilitative counselors, and the sex offender. Sex offenders who are experiencing reintegration under the current policies provided qualitative information into this phenomenon by identifying the challenges that they have experienced. Furthermore, the parole officers and rehabilitative counselors who are experts in the sex offender registration process offered

insight to improve the reintegration experience for convicted sex offenders (Bratina, 2013; Day et al., 2014). The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand how SORNA impacts the process of reintegrating into society for individuals convicted of a sexual offense. Specifically, sex offender's, law enforcement officers', and sex offender therapists' thoughts about SORNA. Therefore, this research contributed to the existing literature by offering a qualitative perspective on a population directly impacted by SORNA legislation, which provided a better understanding of sex offender registration and its impact on reintegration and highlighted the need to recognize the collateral consequences faced by this population when determining the future of sex offender laws.

In Chapter 3, I describe how the study was conducted, the way participants were selected, and a rationale for choosing a phenomenological approach as a suitable methodology for studying sex offenders reintegrating into their communities. Additionally, I provide a review of the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand how SORNA impacts the process of reintegrating into society for individuals convicted of a sexual offense. In reviewing the literature, I found that previous researchers had not conducted qualitative research on the lived experiences of sex offenders during their reintegration into society. It was thus important to determine the experiences of sex offenders from their perspective to fill a gap in the literature.

In this chapter, I reiterate the central research question for this qualitative study and justify the use of a phenomenological design. Additionally, the role of the researcher is discussed as well how I alleviated potential bias in this research. In the “Methodology” section, I describe how I identified and recruited participants and the sample size. Furthermore, the data collection procedures that I used for this phenomenological study, including in-depth interviews of registered sex offenders, law enforcement, and rehabilitative counselors, are discussed as well as how data were transcribed.

In the “Methodology” section, I also explain how I used Moustakas’s (1994) seven-step phenomenological approach to categorize data into themes. Additionally, the use of epoche and bracketing during data analysis to identify and set aside preconceptions, biases, and judgments is justified. Furthermore, I discuss how credibility, reflexivity, and trustworthiness were addressed throughout the research process. This discussion includes information on ethical procedures related to participant protections, informed consent, and confidentiality. To conclude the chapter, I summarize key points.

### **Research Design**

To research the lived experiences of sex offenders living in rural Pennsylvania during reintegration from incarceration to society, I used the phenomenological method of inquiry. Use of the phenomenological method helped me to understand sex offenders' experience with SORNA during reintegration by incorporating the knowledge and experiences of rehabilitative counselors who work with sex offenders. To obtain a thorough understanding of the experience of registered sex offenders during reintegration into society, I sought to answer the central research question, which was, In what ways has SORNA impacted sex offenders' ability to successfully reintegrate into rural Pennsylvania?

Of the two primary approaches to social science research, qualitative and quantitative, a qualitative approach was the more appropriate method of inquiry to answer the central research question. Researchers using a qualitative approach rely on the descriptions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those with familiarity of a phenomenon (Yilmaz, 2013). Therefore, use of qualitative data offered a unique insight on the phenomenon from the perspective of sex offenders, rehabilitative counselors, law enforcement officials who enforce registration requirements, and parole officers who supervise sex offender parolees.

### **Rationale for Phenomenological Method**

According to Rudestam and Newton (2015), researchers conducting a phenomenological study focus on the individual experience and seek to express this experience in language that is as close as possible to that of the individual experiencing



the phenomenon. In this way, a phenomenological qualitative study allows for an examination of the perceptions of the participants on the phenomenon under investigation. Moustakas (1994) stated that the goal of phenomenology is to explore the meaning of and to identify the essence of the lived experience of the research participants. Additionally, Yilmaz (2013) suggested that the focus of the researcher during phenomenological inquiry should be on the participants' descriptions and the established patterns and relationships of a phenomenon. Therefore, this methodology allowed me to obtain accurate descriptions from those experiencing the study phenomenon and analyze the accounts to determine the essence of the phenomenon. Using primary components of phenomenology, epoche and bracketing, I was able to set aside personal biases and presumptions and synthesize data through the perspective of the participants to determine the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Because the goal of this study was to explore registered sex offenders during reintegration into society, a phenomenological method of inquiry was most appropriate to understand the lived experiences of the population under study and aligned well with the research question.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher in this qualitative study, my role was to access the thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences of the participants, who were recruited to offer their perspectives on the reintegration process and sex offender registration. Because of the sensitive nature and the potentially personal and difficult subject matter, my role as a researcher also included ensuring the confidentiality of the subjects and safeguarding the

information that they shared. In order to effectively protect the confidentiality and personal information of participants, I was the only person who had access to the research during the entirety of the study.

My role in the data collection process for this phenomenological study included the role of interviewer. This required me, as the researcher, to remain as unbiased as possible during data collection and analysis. As a qualitative researcher, it was impossible to ignore or completely avoid biases, but reflexivity required that I identify and reflect upon these preconceptions (see Sutton & Austin, 2015). To prevent confirmation bias—that is, forming a hypothesis and using the data collected from respondents to confirm that belief—it was important during data collection to understand my preconceived ideas on the topic and to not let those ideas impact the analysis of the results. Therefore, my role as a researcher involved self-reflection before and during the research process to understand my biases and subjectivities and how my presumptions might affect the findings of the study and to formulate a strategy to minimize any potential bias.

To address any preexisting biases I held, I used bracketing to self-reflect and identify the beliefs I already had about the phenomenon under study (see Tufford & Newman, 2012). After identifying the preexisting knowledge I held about sex offenders and the reintegration process, I strove to put this knowledge aside to acquire an accurate description of the lived experiences of the participants. Part of my role as the researcher was to review all possible biases that exist from my previous experiences, thoughts, or feelings. I was familiar with registered sex offenders and their reintegration experiences prior to conducting this study, so I had to clarify my thoughts to remain objective

throughout the study. Through self-reflection and bracketing, I recognized that this preexisting knowledge could potentially affect the data collection. Therefore, I sought to convey the detailed descriptions of the study participants and not allow biases to interfere with the data collection or analysis.

Another aspect of my role as the researcher was to provide an accurate and detailed account of the participants' lived experience with reintegration into society under SORNA. Therefore, it was important to convey the specific lived experience of the participants and not try to generalize the results to a wider population (Sutton & Austin, 2014). I developed interview questions, conducted face-to-face interviews, transcribed participant responses, and analyzed data to determine emerging themes and patterns. During the analysis process, the data collected from the participants were divided into units representing themes, though I transcribed each interview to provide accuracy and detail. Field notes were also taken to record the context of each face-to-face interview and observations of nonverbal cues, such as facial expression and body language.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

This research included participants from rural Pennsylvania who were convicted of a sexual offense and required to register under SORNA as part of their sentencing. I obtained additional insight through participants who are experts in sex offender therapy and sex offender supervision. In Pennsylvania, each registered sex offender is required to participate in group meetings through a sex offender therapy program. Because this program offers rehabilitation to sex offenders as they transition from prison to the

community, I used purposive sampling to obtain volunteer participants from this population. Rudestam and Newton (2015) explained that purposive sampling involves the deliberate choosing of participants based on who will add to a deeper understanding of the experience being studied. By seeking the advice of sex offender therapy staff members, who have a familiarity with program participants, I identified volunteers for this study. Each volunteer had to meet the criteria of being convicted of a sexual offense and required to register as a sex offender under SORNA. To gain additional insight into this phenomenon, I used purposive sampling to obtain volunteers from sex offender therapists, law enforcement officers, and parole officers.

**Participant selection.** I selected the participants for this phenomenological study because they could contribute knowledge about SORNA and the reintegration experience. Therefore, the registered sex offender participants were each required to register as a sex offender under SORNA and were released from prison at least one year ago. I recruited participants for this phenomenological study through a local sex offender therapy program that each registered sex offender must complete. The group facilitators were given flyers for the study, which described the purpose of the study and the criteria for participation, to hand out to individuals during the group meetings. In order to ensure that participation was voluntary, group facilitators were told that they were not being asked to influence, persuade, or coerce participation in any way. To obtain law enforcement and rehabilitative counselor participants, I recruited volunteers from the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole, the local state police barracks, and the local sex offender therapy program. Each of the experts from these groups were required to

have worked closely with sex offenders during their reintegration from prison to rural Pennsylvania for at least one year.

Each of the participants had to meet the study criteria and volunteer to participate in the study by being interviewed about their reintegration experience. When each potential participant contacted me about participation, they were screened for basic demographic information to ensure that they met the selection criteria. I also provided participants information about the voluntary nature of the research and how confidentiality would be maintained. I then provided consent forms to those who volunteered to participate in the study and met the criteria to complete before the interviews were completed.

**Sample size.** When conducting a phenomenological study, Robinson (2014) recommends no more than twenty-five participants. By keeping the sample size small, it allowed me to probe deeper into the phenomenon with each participant. Rather than relying on a strict number of participants, I continued interviewing volunteers until data saturation had occurred. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), data saturation takes place when new themes are no longer occurring in the data, or there is enough data that the researchers become aware of reoccurring themes and feel they can answer the research question sufficiently. However, without knowing when data saturation will occur, I focused on obtaining five to ten volunteer sex offenders, rehabilitative therapists, and law enforcement officers to interview, with the understanding that I may have needed to recruit additional volunteers if saturation had not yet occurred. By interviewing a small number of participants, I was able to focus on the depth of these interviews and ask

probing questions to provide data to answer the research question. According to Rudestam and Newton (2015), the number of participants in a phenomenological study is not as important as the volume of data that can be used to answer the research question and the depth of data obtained.

### **Instrumentation**

Rather than use a formal data instrument, I developed open-ended questions for my interviews with participants. Interviewing was the most appropriate instrumentation to maintain alignment with the research question of the study because interviews were used to investigate the human experience associated with a phenomenon. In addition to registered sex offenders, sex offender therapists and law enforcement officials were interviewed using purposive sampling because of their familiarity with sex offenders who have experienced reintegration under SORNA. These individuals offered a unique perspective on the lived experience of sex offenders as they reenter the community from prison. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and relied on researcher-produced, open-ended questions and follow up questions when necessary for clarification.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

To obtain the richest data to answer my research question, I collected data through in-person, semi-structured interviews. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) suggest that the decision between structured and unstructured should be determined by the nature of the study, as semi-structured approaches are more inductive and allow for a deeper understanding of a less studied phenomenon. According to Maxwell (2013), the use of

semi-structured interview questions allows the interviewer to guide the research process. Rather than a perfunctory interview in which all participants respond to the same structured questions, a semi-structured approach was adaptable based on the participants' responses. The flexibility of a semi-structured approach was more appropriate to gain a deeper insight into the studied phenomenon of sex offender reintegration. Additionally, in-person interviews were conducted because face to face interviews offered the advantage of being able to directly observe the participants' nonverbal cues (see Patton, 2015). This was especially advantageous when dealing with the sensitive subject of sex offender registration, as it helped me know when the participant felt uncomfortable with a question or whether he was just pausing to prepare a response.

Before each interview, I asked potential participants to answer demographic questions to screen their eligibility for participation. The demographic questions for the sex offender participants included each participant's age, gender, ethnicity, years incarcerated, years since release, and a question confirming their requirement to register as a sex offender. For law enforcement and therapist participants, demographic questions included each participant's age, gender, ethnicity, and the number of years working in a professional capacity with sex offenders. Once participants were chosen, semi-structured interviews were conducted with open-ended questions to allow the participants freedom to speak in depth about their experience with reintegration. Participants remained anonymous, and instead of including individual names, each participant was assigned a number, with the first participant as P1. The sex offender and therapist interviews were conducted in person at the sex offender therapy building because it was convenient for

these participants. Law enforcement interviews were conducted at the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole. Because the treatment center's building and resources were used to conduct interviews, a letter of cooperation was provided to ensure their involvement with this study was voluntary. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes but varied depending on the depth of information provided. When necessary, I used additional probing questions to facilitate deeper data collection. In order to preserve and maintain the accuracy of the data, all interviews were recorded with a reliable recording device and notes were taken during the interviews to document body language and non-verbal cues. After each interview, participants had the opportunity to ask any remaining questions about the purpose of the study, their confidentiality, and privacy of their responses. Each participant was debriefed, and the sex offender participants had the option to speak with a therapist if necessary.

Interviews continued until saturation was achieved and no new themes were presented. If it had been necessary because saturation was not achieved during the first round of interviews, new participants would have been recruited by repeating the process of handing out flyers to obtain new volunteers. A second round of interviews was not necessary, as data saturation occurred with the first group of 10 participants. Throughout the data collection process, I was the only person in possession of the written and audio data. After the interviews were completed, I provided each participant the opportunity to offer additional information to convey their experience with the reintegration process. I transcribed the interviews verbatim for analysis and provided each participant the opportunity to read the transcript to clarify any misinterpretations that may have occurred



during the transcription process. After reading through the transcript, participants had the opportunity to schedule a follow-up interview if they felt their initial responses were misinterpreted.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I performed all data transcription and coding without the use of computer software due to the small number of study participants and to maintain credibility, reliability, and validity (Tessier, 2012). Transcribing the data by hand also helped me become acquainted with the data and self-reflect on the collected information. According to Joosten and Safe (2014), self-reflection can be used during data analysis to help the researcher recognize any preconceptions about the phenomenon that could negatively affect the findings of the study. Once I identified my preconceptions and put those aside, I analyzed the data by grouping responses together based on question, so all question-one responses were grouped together, and so on. Then, I removed any irrelevant, vague, or repetitive details that did not represent the participants' experience. The remaining statements, which Moustakas (1994) described as invariant constituents, represented the essence of the participants' experience and feelings in response to each question. With the data reduced to the essence of each participants' response, I grouped the invariant constituents by theme, which Moustakas (1994) refers to as clustering. To offer further insight into the participants' lived experiences, I included quotations from the interview transcriptions to offer a contextual understanding of the phenomenon experienced by each participant. Lastly, I analyzed the data to determine if any data contradicted the emergent themes or did not support the conclusions of the study. The data I collected

from the interview questions explained the lived experience of registered sex offenders reintegrating into the community and offered rich, contextual descriptions of their experience with this phenomenon.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Creditability**

Qualitative research maintains creditability when the findings of the study are trustworthy. Therefore, it was important that the conclusions of the study represented information from the collected data and represented the actual view of the participants. One way to ensure creditability is through respondent validation, which involved the participant verifying that the study conclusions offered an accurate description of their experiences (Anney, 2014). To obtain respondent validation, I offered to show each participant their transcript and the invariant constituents derived from their interview and allowed them to verify that the emerging themes were true to their lived experience. I also relied on reflexivity to maintain credibility by using open-ended interview questions. Reflexivity is a process that allows individuals who were the most familiar with a phenomenon to describe their own experience (Anney, 2014). In addition to obtaining data directly from the individuals who experienced the phenomenon of sex offender reintegration, I relied on a journal of notes that helped me determine my own preconceptions of this phenomenon and how my background experiences might influence my data collection and analysis. This journal helped me avoid placing my preconceived ideas ahead of those who are experts on their own lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

**Validity**

I achieved validity through obtaining accurate findings. One way to improve validity was through methodological triangulation, which involved using more than one source to study a phenomenon. According to Bekhet and Zausniewski (2012), methodological triangulation is beneficial because it confirms findings, enhances understanding of a phenomenon, and increases validity. By collecting data from registered sex offenders, sex offender treatment facilitators, and law enforcement officers who supervise sex offenders, I ensured that my data was accurate and un-biased. Because common themes emerged from multiple sources, the data can be considered more valid, which improved the study's trustworthiness.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to how relevant a research study's results and conclusions are to other populations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although a phenomenological study relies on a small sample size, I maintained transferability through rich data collection offering a thorough description of the lived experience of those involved with the phenomenon. Cope (2014) suggests that transferability is achieved when the findings of the study are significant to individuals not involved in the study. By collecting data from multiple sources involved with the phenomenon of sex offender reintegration, and providing enough contextual information, other populations can find results and conclusions of this study relevant.

**Dependability**

Dependability relates to trustworthiness in a research study because it protects the accuracy and integrity of the data (Yin, 2013). To maintain dependability, I relied on careful and precise notetaking to outline the data collection and analysis process. I took multiple steps to ensure that the data represented the experiences of the participants and that the findings were representative of their lived experiences. Additionally, all audio data, written transcripts, notes, and journals were stored in a locked cabinet inside my home and no other person had contact with any research documents.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to put aside preconceived ideas about a phenomenon and establish findings based on the collected data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, it was important to prudently analyze qualitative data to ensure that it was not led by researcher assumptions or bias. In order to maintain confirmability, I kept a journal of reflective notes and used it to help me determine my own preconceptions of this phenomenon and how my background experiences might influence the data collection and analysis. Additionally, I used triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources, which also increased confirmability by reducing the potential for researcher or confirmation bias.

**Ethical Procedures**

Discussing the lived experience of registered sex offenders after release from prison was a sensitive topic that might have been difficult for some individuals. Therefore, I obtained Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval

before recruiting any participants or gathering any qualitative data, and all ethical considerations for studies involving human subjects were followed. To prevent any unethical treatment of human subjects, I contacted IRB early in the research process to resolve any possible ethical concerns. Vulnerable populations and topics that could be upsetting to participants require IRB consideration, so it was necessary to contact IRB before conducting research.

**Informed consent.** Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and I informed each individual that they could withdraw at any point during the study. Because of the sensitive nature of the research study, I discussed the type and purpose of the study with each participant and how their data would be kept confidential. I also required each participant to sign informed consent forms, which I kept in a locked filing cabinet within my home. Through these consent forms I explained the background and purpose of the study as well as the requirements of each participant. Because I obtained volunteers for this study through a rehabilitation program that all sex offenders are required to complete, I obtained a letter of cooperation to ensure this program's involvement with this study was voluntary. I made it clear to all potential participants that participation was entirely voluntary and not a prerequisite to successful completion of the rehabilitation program. Additionally, I emphasized that failure to participate in the study would, in no way, negatively impact their status in the program, nor would participation help expedite their graduation from the program or removal from parole.

**Confidentiality.** In order to reduce ethical concerns, I took measures to safeguard confidential information. Participant identities were kept confidential because I used no

names in the study and instead identified individual participants by a number, such as P1 for the first participant. Throughout the data collection process, I was the only person in possession of the written and audio data. Once I gathered the data, I stored all audio data, transcripts, journals, and notes in a locked cabinet. I completed electronic transcription on my personal laptop computer but stored all transcripts on a removable flash drive and not on the computer's hard drive. When not in use, I stored the flash drive in the locked cabinet. All data will be kept for five years after the completion of the study and after five years, all paper and electronic data will be destroyed.

**Sensitive Information.** Due to the potentially sensitive information that participants could share, I emphasized that volunteers did need to share any information they were not comfortable with, and they could cease participation at any time. Because the intent of the research was not to cause any emotional stress or trauma, I took preventative measures in case a participant became too distressed during the interview. If at any time a participant felt overwhelmed or distraught, then the interview would have ended immediately, and the participant would have been free to leave. Additionally, although not in the room during interviews, sex offender therapists were on the premises during and after each interview in case the participant felt it was necessary to speak with a professional at the conclusion of the interview.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand how SORNA impacts the process of reintegrating into society for individuals convicted of a sexual offense. In the introduction I explained the purpose and the importance of this study as

well as identified the research question and justified my use of a qualitative phenomenological study. My role as a researcher was to interview participants and to relay their lived experience without bias and as close to their true experience as possible. Participant recruitment consisted of five to 10 registered sex offenders, law enforcement officers, and sex offender therapists who voluntarily participated in semi-structured, in person interviews to offer information relating to their lived experience of reintegrating into the community while subject to SORNA legislation. I described the strategy for obtaining a sample population, the rationale justifying the sample size, and recruitment procedure. I then explained how I used self-reflection and bracketing to guide the data analysis procedure. Then I discussed how I would ensure trustworthiness by focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, I addressed ethical considerations and the measures I took to ensure ethical treatment of participants and data. In Chapter 4 I detail the setting for the study, the demographics of the participants, and a thorough explanation of the data analysis procedure, including the invariant constituents and themes that emerged from the data.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand how SORNA impacts the process of reintegrating into society for individuals convicted of a sexual offense. I used a qualitative research method to explore this phenomenon and to answer the primary research question for this study: In what ways has SORNA impacted sex offenders' ability to successfully reintegrate into rural Pennsylvania? I also sought to answer two subquestions: (a) In what ways do law enforcement officers in rural Pennsylvania observe the impact of SORNA on successful reintegration for sex offenders? and (b) How do rehabilitative counselors in rural Pennsylvania perceive the impact of SORNA on successful reintegration for sex offenders? In this chapter, I describe the setting for the data collection as well as present demographic information for the population that I interviewed. I also review the procedures I used to conduct the semi-structured interviews with the 10 participants and to analyze the data and determine the themes that relate to the study's research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary of key points.

### **Setting**

I conducted in-person interviews with the 10 participants. All interviews were completed in private locations without any interruptions, as determined by the IRB. No participants requested to withdraw their participation from the study, and there were no signs of emotional or physical distress exhibited by any participant. Before each interview, I reviewed the interview process, and gave each participant the opportunity to



ask any additional questions that had not been covered in the consent procedures. After each interview, I debriefed each participant to allow them the opportunity to contact a crisis center or speak with a counselor. None of the participants expressed any emotional or psychological concerns, and each participant declined the opportunity to speak with a professional as a result of the interview process. Additionally, at no time did any participant request to stop the study or withdraw their participation in the study.

### **Demographics**

The research sample consisted of seven White, male registered sex offenders between the ages of 26 and 55. The research sample also included one female rehabilitative counselor between the ages of 26 and 55 and two law enforcement officers, one male and one female, between the ages of 36 and 45. After obtaining consent to conduct the interview, I determined each participant's eligibility using a demographic questionnaire that was completed by each potential participant. The demographic questions for the sex offender participants included each participant's age, gender, ethnicity, years incarcerated, years since release, and a question confirming their requirement to register as a sex offender. For law enforcement and therapist participants, demographic questions included each participant's age, gender, ethnicity, and the number of years spent working in a professional capacity with sex offenders. I asked these questions to determine demographic information as well as to screen for participation in the study, as each participant was required to be a registered sex offender who had been released from prison for at least 1 year. Of the seven individuals who volunteered to participate in this study as registered sex offenders, only one did not meet the study

criteria as he had not been in prison and therefore would not be able to offer information for the research question of how registering as a sex offender impacts the reintegration process. The rehabilitative counselor and parole officers were given a separate screening questionnaire. While this questionnaire also included demographic information, such as age, gender, and race, it also included a screening question asking how long the participant has worked in a professional capacity with registered sex offenders, as each participant was required to have worked at least 1 year with registered sex offenders. Once I established that each potential participant met the study's criteria, the interviews commenced. In order to preserve confidentiality, I did not use participants' names in study documents. Instead of names, participants were identified with a number, ranging from P1 to P10. The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1 (for registered sex offenders) and Table 2 (for professionals who work with registered sex offenders).

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Participants (Registered Sex Offenders)*

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Ethnicity	Year incarcerated	Years in prison	Years released from prison
P1	26-35	Male	White	2012	5	2
P2	36-45	Male	White	2010	6.5	2
P3	46-55	Male	White	2012	3.5	4
P4	46-55	Male	White	2012	5	12
P5	26-35	Male	White	2014	2	3
P6	26-35	Male	White	2015	.25	3
P8	46-55	Male	White	2012	.25	7

Table 2

*Demographic Information of Participants (Professionals Who Work With Registered Sex Offenders)*

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years working with sex offenders
P7	36-45	Female	White	4
P9	36-45	Female	White	14
P10	36-45	Male	White	4

**Data Collection**

To collect data to answer the research questions, I conducted in-person, semi structured interviews with seven registered sex offenders in rural counties in Northwest Pennsylvania and three professionals who work closely with registered sex offenders in rural counties in Northwest Pennsylvania. The participants volunteered to participate in the study after responding to flyers detailing the subject of the study (see Appendices A and B). Each individual who volunteered to participate signed a consent form and then completed a screening demographic questionnaire (see Appendices C and D) to ensure they met the study's inclusion criteria. An interview protocol (see Appendices E and F) was used to structure each interview and provided each participant the opportunity to ask questions prior to the interview. Interviews with registered sex offenders were completed in person during the months of March and April 2019. Interviews with professionals were completed in person during the months of April 2019 and October 2019. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on how much detail the individual provided. At no point in the interview process did any participant voluntarily withdraw from the study. One participant was withdrawn from the study, however, due to not

having served prison time and therefore failing to meet the study's criteria of reintegrating into the community from prison. During the interview process, there were no interruptions. Each participant was interviewed only once, and all volunteers, with the exception of the individual who was withdrawn, completed the interview.

Each of the research participants authorized the use of a digital recorder for their interview, so each interview was recorded using a Sony recording device. After the interviews, there was no need to follow-up with the participants, as no clarification was needed during the transcription process. To analyze the data, I transcribed each interview into a Microsoft Word document. All transcription was done verbatim without the use of software programs. I saved each transcription and recorded file onto a flash drive, accessed only by me and password protected. Once the recordings were saved onto the flash drive, I removed each recording from the recording device, as the device itself does not offer password protection. The flash drive containing all recordings and transcripts, the hard copy informed consents and demographic questionnaires, and all notes taken during the interview process were stored in a locked filing cabinet, accessible only by me. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, nothing varied from the procedures detailed in Chapter 3.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step in the data analysis process was transcribing and coding each of the interviews, which was done without the use of computer software. After transcribing the interviews, I read the transcripts several times to ensure accuracy of the transcripts and also to immerse myself in the data. This process also allowed me to self-reflect in order

to determine any preconceptions or biases that might have a negative impact on my study; a process Moustakas calls epoché. Once I identified and set aside any preconceptions, I grouped the responses together based on question so the answers of the participants could be compared. Following Moustakas's principles for data analysis, the process began with the process of horizontalization, where general themes were recognized in the data. Next I assessed each sentence to determine whether it was necessary to effectively capture the phenomenon being studied. Then I removed any irrelevant, vague, or repetitive details that did not represent the participants' experience, leaving only the essence of the participants' experience and feelings in response to each question. Next, I highlighted and color coded the invariant constituents based on themes. With the data reduced to the essence of each participants' response, the invariant constituents were grouped by theme, which Moustakas (1994) refers to as clustering. I accomplished this by identifying emerging themes through the color-coded highlighting that had been completed in the previous step. Once the themes were clustered, I used a single word or short phrase to label each cluster as a way to identify emerging themes and patterns. During this stage of data analysis, 53 initial thematic categories were identified. After determining these 53 initial categories, I reviewed the data to determine any redundant or overlapping themes and reduced the total number of categories to eight unique themes that had been presented from the data. These eight themes represent the essence of the lived experience of sex offenders reintegrating into society. The eight emerging themes and 53 invariable constituents can be seen in Appendix G. Then, to offer further insight into the participants' lived experiences, quotations from the interview

transcriptions were blocked to be included in the study's results as a way of offering a contextual understanding of the phenomenon experienced by each participant. I determined that saturation had occurred because each of the eight themes had significant support from the responses. There were no themes that did not have support from more than one participant. A summary of themes per participant is shown in Table 3. Lastly, I analyzed the data to determine if any data contradicted the emergent themes or did not support the conclusions of the study. No data from this study was found to contradict the emergent themes.

Table 3

*Themes by Participant*

Theme	Participants who identified theme
1. Employment Obstacles	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10
2. Societal Stigmatization	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10
3. Social Isolation	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P10
4. Psychological Burdens	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8,
5. Importance of Rehabilitation	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
6. Broken Relationships	P1, P2, P5, P6, P8
7. Importance of Support System	P1, P2, P4, P8, P9
8. Political Powerlessness	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P10

**Evidence of Trustworthiness****Credibility**

I employed strict protocols, as discussed in Chapter 3, to ensure the credibility of research during data collection and analysis. I used respondent validation by offering each participant the opportunity to verify that the study conclusions offered an accurate description of their experiences. Of the 10 participants, none made any changes to or

offered additional comments to the transcripts of their interviews. Additionally, no participants refuted that the invariant constituents and emerging themes represented their lived experiences. Lastly, I informed the participants that they would be able to view the final dissertation after it was analyzed and approved. I also maintained credibility during data collection and analysis through reflexivity. I used open-ended interview questions to ensure individuals who were the most familiar with the phenomenon of returning to society while registering as a sex offender were able to describe their lived experiences. In addition to obtaining data directly from the individuals who experienced this phenomenon, I kept a journal of notes that helped me determine my own preconceptions of this phenomenon as a way to avoid placing my preconceived ideas ahead of those who are experts on their own lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I also implemented triangulation to validate the findings of the study (Anney, 2014). Not only did I triangulate data by interviewing participants from three different sources (registered sex offenders, rehabilitative counselors, and parole officers), but I also compared emergent themes to the findings of other research studies on registered sex offenders. Another method to ensure credibility was the use of saturation in my study. After the transcripts were completed and coded, a final examination was conducted to ensure that saturation was attained. Saturation was accomplished after the seventh interview when no new information or themes emerged (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). There were no adjustments or changes to the strategies conveyed in Chapter 3 that might affect the credibility of the present study.

**Transferability**

In order to ensure the transferability of the study, I provided rich and detailed descriptions and contextual illustrations of the perceptions and experiences of the participants' accounts. No changes were made to the description of procedures in Chapter 3 that directly influenced the transferability of this study. Although qualitative phenomenological studies are typically not generalizable to wider populations, transferability is enabled when individuals reading the findings in a study can associate these findings with the experiences of others. Therefore, the contextual information provided in this study should increase transferability for future studies. By collecting data from multiple sources involved with the phenomenon of sex offender reintegration, and providing enough contextual information, other populations can find results and conclusions of this study relevant.

**Dependability**

Dependability relates to trustworthiness in a research study because it protects the accuracy and integrity of the data (Yin, 2013). To maintain dependability, I took careful and precise notes to outline the data collection and analysis process. Therefore, I took multiple steps to ensure that the data represented the actual experiences of the participants and that the findings were representative of their lived experiences. Additionally, I stored all audio data, written transcripts, notes, and journals in a locked cabinet inside my home and no other person has or will have contact with any research documents. I detailed the specific steps taken in this research project in order to outline the context, method, participants, and data collection and analysis to determine whether



results would be different under similar research conditions. No changes were made to the outline in Chapter 3 that would impact the dependability of this research.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to establish findings that are not based on the researcher's preconceived ideas of a phenomenon and the extent to which the researcher can demonstrate that the study's findings are based on the interpretation of the data collected during the study (Cope, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In order to maintain confirmability, I kept a journal of reflective notes and used bracketing to help determine my preconceptions of this phenomenon and how my background experiences might influence the data collection and analysis. While analyzing the data, I was careful to reflect on the insights and feelings of the participants in order to focus on their actual lived experiences. Additionally, I used triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources and increased confirmability by reducing the potential for researcher or confirmation bias. Nothing was changed from the strategies outlined in Chapter 3 that would affect the confirmability of this study.

### **Results**

Through this phenomenological study, I gained a better understanding of the lived experience of the participants through the context of their responses. The participant responses offered background information about the experience of transitioning from prison into society while also being required to register as a sex offender. Based on the participant responses, eight themes emerged that responded to the original research question of: In what ways has SORNA impacted sex offenders' ability to successfully

reintegrate into rural Pennsylvania? In order to be considered an emergent theme, each theme had to be identified by at least five of the 10 participants. Then, because no new themes emerged, it was evident that data saturation had occurred. The eight themes to emerge included financial burdens and employment challenges, stigmatization by society, self-imposed social isolation, psychological and emotional burdens, importance of counseling, broken family relationships, the importance of family support, and political powerlessness. I also included specific quotes that relate to each theme in order to further portray the magnitude of these themes in answering the research question.

### **Theme 1: Financial Burdens and Employment Challenges**

Eight of the 10 participants noted financial burdens and employment challenges as a struggle during reintegration. Of the seven sex offender participants, four were currently employed, two were on disability and one was an unemployed father who stays home with his children. Two of the professional participants also noted the difficulties that sex offenders face when trying to find employment. One of the most commonly expressed employment challenges was the unwillingness of employers to offer employment once it is known that the job seeker is a registered sex offender.

P10: One of the biggest barriers is employment. Even though the laws state that the registry can't be used against them for employment purposes, but I'm sure behind the curtain, it's definitely being used. I've seen guys who have been offered jobs but then once the background check comes back, then the HR department rescinds the offer.

P1: When I was looking for a job, one kind of came out and said that makes it really hard for us to hire you, not just because of the felony but because of, you know, a felony with a minor.

P8: When I first got put on the registry, I had a job. But, within a month, I got laid off from there. They didn't come out and say it was because I was a sex offender, but I was a good worker, helped train other people and didn't get into trouble on the job. It seems pretty likely to me that they were looking for a reason to let me go once I had to register.

Some participants expressed that although they were able to obtain employment after their release from prison, they were unable to secure employment at the same skill level or income that they held prior to incarceration.

P3: I've worked at a sawmill for about four years. It wasn't hard for me to find a job, but I did find it difficult to get back into the work I was doing before. When I tried to find a job in my previous field, I was turned down just because of my conviction.

P1: When I was incarcerated, I got certified as a peer support specialist; I would help guys. Then when I got out, that is what I tried to pursue as an occupation. I put in 30 something applications and resumes...sexual predator stamp...so they were like yeah, no. I had two interviews out of all that. That was nerve wracking, trying to explain all that.

P5: It's been rough. Hard to find a job- no one wants to hire you. I ended up finding a job through a family friend. This is a different field then I was working

before though. Because of my charges, I was suspended until they found out whether I would be convicted or not. After I was convicted, I was terminated. So, then I was searching for work until I was sentenced. I settled for this job but I'm not making anywhere close to the money I was making before. I went from making close to \$100,000 a year, to making about \$33-\$34,000.

Participants found it especially frustrating because it was very difficult to find professional jobs, and most ended up taking physically demanding manual labor jobs because that was all they could find. Then, once they found a job, it was very difficult to move into a better position within that field.

P1: It's fairly difficult to find a job. Be prepared to do menial labor. Not necessarily that you can't move up, but it is very difficult to move up. At my last cooking job, they needed someone else to be a manager. So, I stepped up and started leading shifts and it was fine but when the manager training came up, they were like, well you have a felony. People were like we can't let this guy lead because he is a sex offender and he did this. There was a lady there who they hired for a manager's position and I was training her, and she was trying to get me fired. She had me demoted by going to the manager and accusing me of doing things. I had worked there for over a year and never had a write up for anything. So, you go from having a perfect record to you're being demoted because she's saying this. Even when you try to succeed and push past all the stigma and the bullshit, you still have people who are like come back down here to the bottom. It's difficult...it's fucking hard.

P2: It's hard in a rural area because everyone knows everyone else. The jobs around here are mostly small businesses instead of larger corporations, so all your customers know you. It's harder to go out on a limb for someone when it could affect your customers views of your business. Around here, we don't have a lot of the businesses that are supposed to hire felons like more urban areas do. Plus, bigger corporations have government incentives to hire people with criminal backgrounds, that the small businesses around here don't get. Then there are so many jobs out there that sex offenders aren't allowed to work. I can't be a bus driver, work at a daycare, be mall security...nothing that requires clearances. But there could be reform among employers to help sex offenders because not being able to find work is another major reason people recidivate. With the registry the way it is, it's unlikely to change, but there are ways to improve the lives of people who are on the registry.

P10: For those who are trying to better themselves and try to get financial aid, a lot of times they're shot down because of the criminal offense. Which then keeps them held at a certain socio-economic status because can't progress further because they don't have the financial status to pursue work in a competitive field.

P8: When I couldn't find a job, I thought about going back to school for something. But then I was told that because there might be students under the age of 18 in my college classes, I wouldn't be allowed to attend any real college classes. I thought about doing online classes, but then I found out that I couldn't get financial aid. I had family who offered to help pay, but there was no way that

was an option. I put my family through enough financial burden. Plus, even with a college degree I didn't think it would make a difference to any employers once they found out I was a sex offender.

Many of the participants expressed discouragement because of financial burdens that occurred as a result of difficulty finding gainful employment.

P1: One of the requirements after you get out of prison is to do treatment classes.

I've been done with treatment for a while, but since I'm not working, I don't have health insurance, so I owe for my exit polygraph- \$1100. They charge me \$75 to come here every week, but in order to graduate, I have to pay what I owe. I could leave if I had the money.

P8: After my conviction, I ended up moving in with my friend's mom. I helped take care of her because she needed help with cooking and cleaning, but I couldn't help her pay the bills. She did a lot for me- taking me in, helping with the costs of a lawyer and everything. It would have been nice to be able to pay her back, but without getting a job, I just couldn't.

## **Theme 2: Stigmatization by Society**

The second theme that emerged from the participants' responses was the stigmatization they felt from society since their release. Of the ten participants, all ten mentioned the stigma felt by sex offenders reentering the community from prison. Many of the participants expressed how damaging social media was to the feelings of stigmatization.

P6: At first, I was to register as an SVP. At the time, I had Facebook prior to being sentenced. My charges were all over the internet and Facebook. My registration was alerted everyone. The Facebook post got 1,000 shares and many threatening comments. I cancelled Facebook and haven't looked at it since.

P1: I assume that you probably have a Facebook, and you see posts like all pedophiles should be hung or castrated. I got an uncle who knows that I was in prison but still posts that shit.... when I see Facebook stuff about it, I don't even like to engage it because all its going to do is make me stressed out and I'm not going to change anybody's mind. I'll scroll through and be like oh this guy is supportive of that, that's kind of weird. But my first thought is that anyone who says there is rehabilitation and stuff that someone is probably looking them up to see if they were ever charged with this. I'm not going to put myself in a position to have exposure in a negative light. But it really does suck. Society's viewpoint of sex offenders is so negative and so much of it is myth.

P5: Social media really spreads the negative labels about sex offenders. You go on there and see oh he did this and everyone chimes in with negative comments. No one cares to know what actually went on, they just go on and read all the negative comments.

P7: Sex offenders are basically social pariahs- the media has taken its toll on individuals. Anytime one thing happens to one person and it's put in the media and thrown out there, then it affects every other sex offender again. It puts them

under the spotlight again. It's not easy. Whether it's being offended upon or someone victimizes a child- the backlash hits everyone regardless of their crime.

P9: There's a lot of people posting things on Facebook about sex offenders being kid-touchers or baby rapists and stuff. There's a lot of backlash with all the labeling. As a society we really don't like sex offenders as people. We don't want our kids anywhere near them and we'd rather they weren't in our communities as all.

P3: When you are on the sex offender registry, you're automatically the worst person in the world- regardless of the crime you committed. The comments on Facebook posts are so heinous. They say that all sex offenders should be shot. It's like sex offenders are still humans who have served the sentence for the crime, but the world still wants to see all of us tarred and feathered. You don't need a high IQ to access the registry and the public list of names makes it really easy for someone to troll sex offenders. It's a lot easier to target 1000 people you don't know on a keyboard than it is to work on your own stuff.

Another commonality between participants was that society had certain judgements about sex offenders without knowing the truth about their conviction.

P2: Society doesn't realize that there are a broad range of crimes that can get you added to the registry. People automatically think child molester but even peeing on the sidewalk or flashing someone can get you added to the registry. Even though when you look up on the registry to see what someone's specific crime is,



the way that its listed in the registry doesn't give you the full picture of what that person did, and that leads to misunderstandings.

P5: People have all sorts of opinions about sex offenders- all negative. They treat us all the same even though they don't know us as individuals or what our crime was. They don't know what happens after we get released from prison and all the rehabilitation we have to go through. All they see is that one bad thing you do. I'd like to say to society, don't judge us before you know us. We have a lot to give to society. We messed up; we did our time. We've gone through treatment. Just because of one bad action, it shouldn't be a scar for us for the rest of our lives.

P6: All sex offenders on the registry get a bad reputation. They don't look at the charges and assume we are all pedophiles. People make mistakes but most of the people on there don't pose any threat. Society believes that sex offenders are beyond help and cannot be rehabilitated. They assume that sex offenders are the most terrible people on the face of the earth. It's like society doesn't view sex offenders as human beings.

P3: There is a generalization about sex offenders. I hate to say it but a lot of it goes back to Megan's Law because a lot of the people who look at the sex offender registry assume that everyone on there is the same. To society, we're all hiding in the bushes, ready to abduct their children.

P4: We're the boogey man. The media is always looking to sensationalize. What's the next big story. Sex offenders are always going to be the next big story. There is no difference in the public's eye between someone who has a relationship with

a 17-year-old and someone who rapes a toddler. They are one in the same- all the guy in the trench coat.

P9: There are some cases of individuals who shouldn't have on the registry based on their crime. There are different levels of sex offenders, hence the tier system.

A lot of people assume that all sex offenders are pedophiles, which just isn't true.

Participants explained how the label of sex offender contributes to the negative opinions that society has for individuals on the registry.

P6: Society looks at me and think I'm a piece of shit, pedophile, that I should commit suicide. A waste of space. I just wish that people would like talk to someone who is a sex offender but not look at that. Just talk to them as a human. 99% of people would think they are normal, cool people. You wouldn't think of a sex offender as a demon or a piece of shit if you looked beyond the label. We're normal humans that made mistakes but we're not demons, pedophiles, or pieces of shit.

P10: One of the biggest barriers for sex offenders is that they are definitely labeled. The registry will do that enough but there is definitely a label that sex offenders that have. Socially, culturally it's as if people progress through life and our society evolves, they produce and propagate these behaviors and their very quick to condemn it. Society treats sex offenders horribly. I mean I see the legislative intentions of the law but are they used for the intended purpose, of course not. They'll use it to harass or put it on social media. Ironically, in society the deviant side of sex is more downplayed and accepted. But with the new

generation they make it seem ok until it happens with someone they know, then they are quick to turn around and condemn it. Popular television shows have older characters in relationships with underage girls and society loves it. Then, when it happens to someone you know, that man is a pervert, a pedophile.

Two participants described how even in the prison system sex offenders face a high degree of stigmatization.

P3: I was in a prison that was 65% sex offenders and there was still a stigma from the other felons. The rest of the convicts treated sex offenders like garbage.

Among the other sex offenders there was the idea that I might have committed this crime but at least I'm not a sex offender. They really do act like sex offenders are the worst of the worst.

P8: Whenever I first got to jail, I was taunted. This kid would walk past my cell and mutter baby toucher over and over again. Usually the guys who gave me the most trouble were the ones that ended up getting out of jail then immediately picking up another charge and going back in. I had a misdemeanor indecent assault charge compared to other, more severe convictions. But in jail, I was considered one of the worst.

Several participants described negative interactions with members of their communities based on the fact that they are registered sex offenders.

Participant 4: When I got out of prison, I moved to temporary housing and then found an apartment. Within a day or two of me moving in, a gentleman knocked on the door of my apartment and said he was from the neighborhood association.

He informed me that because I was on Megan's Law and a sex offender that the neighborhood didn't want me there and he said I had to move out. I told him I wouldn't leave unless it's in a body bag and he said well we're going to get you out of here. I never heard from him again after that, but I know they wanted me gone.

Participant 8: Even people that are supposed to be well educated still have preconceived ideas about sex offenders. I went to a therapist once to talk through some of the feelings I had about being a sex offender and I mentioned my wife was pregnant. This therapist, instead of saying congratulations, said "are you even allowed to have children since you're a pedophile?" I didn't bother trying to explain to her that not all sex offenders are pedophiles and that there was no law against having children...she already had her mind made up about who I was.

Participant 4: There was an incident years ago. I was pumping gas at the gas station and she was like, you're one of those sex offenders, baby rapers.

### **Theme 3: Social Isolation**

From the qualitative data, the third emergent theme was the participants' feelings of social isolation upon reentering the community, which was referenced by seven of the participants. One of reasons that many participants cited for their social isolation is the fear that someone would accuse them of breaking Megan's Law, and they would be sent back.

P1: It's not about what you do but about what people think you do. And it only takes one call from someone who will give that sworn statement to the PO that

this guy did this or that, or I saw him doing this and they're not going to ask questions and I'll sit in a jail cell for a couple of months before they even come to talk to me.

P5: Being a sex offender has changed my want to go out into public and do things. As soon as you have that label it doesn't take anything to get thrown back to jail. If anyone says anything, they'll throw you back in jail and ask questions later. You're guilty until proven innocent. Even going to the grocery store, you're leery of whose there and what's going on- it's always in the back of your mind. You're always edgy when you're in public wondering if someone is going to say anything.

P8: Shortly after I got out, I went to visit my girlfriend's family. Her nephew was there, and he was under 18 at the time. He went to give me a hug when we were leaving, and I about had a panic attack. My girlfriend had to step between us so he wouldn't touch me. I was so paranoid of him saying something and someone getting the wrong idea. You never know who will run their mouth and since I'm already a sex offender it would just take one accusation to send me back. I still get really bad anxiety in public. If I'm eating at a restaurant, I'm constantly aware of my surroundings.

Of the participants, four stated that they avoid social situations altogether because of their mistrust of people and fear of being accused of wrongdoing.

P1: My one neighbor runs like an illegal daycare, so she's got people coming and going all the time and kids all over the place. I don't pay them no mind. If she

comes out, I'm like hey how're you doing. My other neighbors have an autistic kid in his twenties- he mows my lawn. I try not to talk to him, and my wife pays him.

P6: I don't like to do anything out of the house unless my girlfriend is there. I'll go to the grocery store for emergencies, but I don't like to go if it's not run in and run out. I don't do anything much by myself. I still feel like people just glare at me. Maybe it's just me, but I am still paranoid.

P8: When I first got out, I would barely leave the house without my wife. Even if I had to go to the bathroom in public, she would stand right outside the door just so no one could suggest anything happened while I was in there. You just try so hard to avoid accusations and it's easier to do that if you just keep to yourself.

P3: I struggle with social anxiety and being on the registry doesn't help that go away. I tend to just keep to myself.

The data revealed that three of the participants used to be very outgoing and social individuals, but after being labeled as a sex offender, they withdrew from society.

P2: This whole thing has impacted how I make friends. I'm cautious about who I keep around me. I don't go to the bar or socialize anymore. I don't put myself in situations where there is a possibility of meeting someone who isn't understanding.

P6: My girlfriend and I used to be very spontaneous, and we would just drive to the city when we were bored. Now I can't do that. I barely like to leave the house now.

P8: Being on the registry turns you into an introvert. I used to have a bunch of friends and have hobbies. When I was convicted, most of my friends turned their back on me. The irony is that when you re-join society, they want you to form positive relationships- how the hell are you supposed to form positive relationships when everyone knows what you are and has their mind made up about what you did?

#### **Theme 4: Psychological and Emotional Factors**

Six participants noted the emotional and psychological factors that reintegrating as a sex offender had caused. They described the fear, anxiety, paranoia, insomnia, and lack of confidence that they feel because of the sex offender label. One of the primary psychological factors that came out during data collection was the fear of being physically targeted for being a sex offender.

P1: All the registry does is light the torch for the mob and it creates that mob mentality- the us versus them mentality. Because people are stupid and the scenario that goes through my head is that someone who went through something traumatic as a kid is going to see my address shoot me through the windows or something. Shit like that plays through your head and you know it might happen because that's the way society views us...like it would be okay if we all got shot. It changes your outlook on a lot of things. Like people see stories in the paper and think, oh that piece of shit, they should all be killed.

P3: Everyday I'm paranoid that someone will see my address on the list and think they should come after me. I've heard cases that have actually been happening.

There was a guy in Ohio who was gunning down sex offenders because they were on the list.

P7: There was also a man where someone drove through his town with a bullhorn saying your neighbor is a sex offender and did this....I mean, it affected his parents and everything. When things like this are happening because of the registry, how can you not have social anxiety and paranoia?

P6: I have a lot of faith in the law and the system, but sometimes I think that if someone sees that I'm on the registry and sees me in public and physically harms me, which cop am I going to get? The one who believes in justice or one that lets the other guy go because he just beat up a sex offender and no one cares about that.

One participant even worried that his family would be targeted as a result of the registry.

P1: They tell you to register any car you may drive. Like, I don't want to have to register my wife's car, so I don't drive it. If something happens to her, and that's the paranoia because, you know, if someone sees that car is on the registry and does something to her because of that, the guilt would just be horrible...What happens when someone is like, that guy lives over there and I know someone who was assaulted. Let's go teach this guy a lesson. I mean, I'm a felon. I can't protect my family; I can't have a gun. What happens if someone who sees me on the registry tries to burn my house down. I mean, it's not just me in there, I have a wife and kid. That's the fear that really keeps me up at night. What happens when



somebody crosses that line? At the end of the day, what does that solve. It takes a father away from his kid.

Two participants noted how their perception has changed since their transition back into the community as a result of being on the sex offender registry.

P1: My perception has definitely changed of everybody and everything. I used to be pretty trusting but now I'm like what's your angle, what's your motive? But the paranoia is always there. I'm a pretty tough guy- mentally, physically, emotionally, and I'm still afraid.

P8: Before I was convicted, I wasn't afraid of anything. I was in the service and fought for my country. Now, I am constantly paranoid. I have trouble sleeping at night- I have nightmares almost every night. I can't leave the house without looking over my shoulder and worrying that something might happen- that someone will recognize me or accuse me of doing something. Transitioning into the community is when you're supposed to try to put your crime behind you and move on with your life- be a contributing member of society. But sex offenders always have this label- there is no way to move on from that.

Another cited emotional and psychological burden after reentering society was the fear of unintentionally breaking the sex offender registry rules. As a sex offender, an individual is required to report any changes to their information within three days and they must report any vehicle that they will be driving. Several participants noted that the rules can be vague and there was a fear of being noncompliant with the registry laws.

P1: I still worry about breaking the rules all the time, especially like when I check the Megan's Law registry because I always have the people that have absconded and I'm always like God I hope I don't see my picture on there. I mean, I try to make sure that everything is on there and accurate, but you still worry that you'll miss something, and the police will show up at your door. I really try to make sure everything is correct and that I'm not doing anything that could break it. Like I had that incident that happened when I got out where my wife when I was in prison froze my Facebook account. Well when I got out, I didn't activate it and you know, Smart Phones these days- I didn't have that shit when I went in- but I could go onto my messenger and talk to people that had been on my friends list. So, I had been doing that for the longest time and my PO asked if I had anything I wanted to update on the registry and I said yeah, I want to put this on there in case I wanted to use Facebook again. And he said, well how long have you been using Messenger. I told him about 4 months or whatever and he was like you can't do that, it's a violation. But I didn't even realize that using Messenger was a violation of the registry- I had no idea. I thought because I wasn't searching for people and it was people I had already been friends with that I could use it, but then to find out it was a violation, I was like oh shit. Like I said, that just adds to the paranoia of everything.

P5: When you get out, they give you a packet that lists the rules you have to follow. But there are some grey areas that don't go into detail. Like it says to register your vehicle, but it doesn't say to register every vehicle that you might

ever drive. It doesn't say what counts as a vehicle. I have a snow mobile, does that count? I try to ask at the police station, but they don't even know the answers, so who do you ask? Not knowing doesn't mean shit when they want to put you back in for noncompliance.

P6: I have always crossed my t's and dotted my i's with registration. Double, triple check everything. Some people have really busy lives. Say you break your phone and you lost your sim card. Now you have to get a new phone number and you have to register that new number. But then you have to work 3 doubles at work and you're not thinking about updating that phone number. 3 days goes by and all of a sudden, you're being charged with a felony.

P1: My dad died in august. I called my PO and was like hey, my dad just died, and he was like come get the paperwork and go down there for the funeral. I told him how long I was going, but when I got down there, the first thing I had to do was go to the police station and be like hey, my name is so and so and I'm a registered sex offender, this is why I'm here, this is how long I'm staying. I need a business card from a police officer to take back to my PO. Then 24 hours after the day I was supposed to return I had to be in there and give him that card and submit myself to a drug test. So not only dealing with losing my dad but all this shit on top of that.

P2: You can go twenty years without messing up and if you miss a registration or if you don't keep your information up to date, you can get sent back to prison. They don't even have to factor in that you've gone twenty years without messing

up. If you get a hangman judge who has it out for sex offenders, then that could definitely happen.

Another source of psychological trauma comes from the prison experience. One participant noted how even after release from prison, it is hard to leave the prison mentality behind.

P1: So, a lot of it was trying to get rid of prison mentality...the mentality is kind of the kill or be killed mentality and it sucks to have and it's a hard thing to get rid of. They would joke in here all the time about prison rules and it's like respect me or else. It was very hard to navigate that, and I think a lot of guys go through that with ok I'm feeling a certain way. How do I put that into every day, normal terms and activities? But, being on the registry makes it so that prison memory can't fade and it's hard to get out of that mentality. I mean, other felons get to move on with their lives after prison, but the registry makes it so there is a constant reminder of your crime so it's hard to move past it. The paranoia though, it leads to all sorts of crazy what if scenarios and preparation for things that you hope never happen, but you never know.

Because of the nature of their crime, several participants noted how easy it would be to be accused of something and going back to prison as a result. Those who mentioned this fear stated that because they have already been convicted of a sexual crime, if anyone even suggested that they were alone with or did anything inappropriate with a minor that they would be in violation, even if the accusation was false.

P2: In our position, we're already marked. So, any little thing, they're going to lock you up for. You're a marked target, you have a big circle on your back, so we have to be very vigilant in what we do to ensure that we don't break those rules. They're not going to screw around if you mess up. It seems like they are just waiting to send you back. Like in my situation I have a 16-year-old stepdaughter and an 18-year-old stepson, so with my stepdaughter since she's only 16 we're never alone together. So, we just have an understanding that she doesn't ride in the car with me by herself and we're never home alone together. And I don't have any fear that she would ever accuse me of anything, but appearances are everything and if the neighbor sees that we're alone and my wife isn't home then they could get upset and call the cops on me.

P1: Up until we moved back in together (because before that I was living with my grandparents), my daughter would sleep in bed with my wife. It's a fight because I have to tell the kid she has to sleep in her own bed. Because if my daughter tells someone that she sleeps in mommy and daddy's bed every night and a teacher overhears that, and I'm sure the teachers are aware that I'm on the registry, then they might be like oh maybe we should call child services. Things like that are constantly what I'm paranoid about. It only takes one person, like if me and the wife and kid are going to leave the house or something and me and the kid step outside and my wife is two seconds behind me and the neighbor just sees me and the kid on the porch then the rumor starts that he's alone with his kid.

Three participants commented on the anxiety and edginess they experience as a result of being on Megan's law and having to register.

P1: When you first get out of prison, you're constantly worried. Like, I heard a car in the driveway, what's going to happen. Is that my PO? The further out you get, the more that memory of prison fades, but having to register all the time just brings those memories back.

P6: My anxiety gets really bad every December and any time I have to register anything. I try not to have to register anything. The less I have to go register, the better. If I had to choose, I would rather go to my probation officer. It's not that police officers do or say anything to make you uncomfortable, but their demeanor is so strict because of their training, but it still makes you feel like shit.

P8: Once every three months, I get reminded of how big of a piece of shit I am. Plus, there is so much anxiety about not getting the paperwork in time because you need to take that in when you register. When I get my stuff in the mail, I try to go that day to register because I am physically nauseous until I get it taken care of. I just get so paranoid that something will happen, and I won't be able to. I actually had to plan my wedding around my registration time because I knew I wouldn't be able to relax for the wedding if I didn't get it done before. What should have been one of the happiest days of my life and all I could think about was fucking registration.

### **Theme 5: Importance of Rehabilitation**

Seven of the participants addressed their required rehabilitation program. Each individual convicted of a sexual offense is required to complete a sex offender treatment program referred to as *group* by several participants. The participants explained how group rehabilitates the offender by requiring them to self-reflect and examine their offense.

P8: The treatment for sex offenders teaches you about empathy and makes you reflect on the red flags that led to your offense and how to prevent re-offense. It's not easy and it really makes you examine yourself and brings up a lot of the shit that caused you to be the way you are. But recognizing why you did what you did and having empathy for your victim makes you a lot less likely to reoffend. I have a completely different perspective on my crime because of the treatment that I got.

P1: Group is very beneficial. They can give you every tool in the world, but you still have to use it. The paperwork is hard, and you really have to do some soul searching. There's no way to fake it till you make it because it will come out. Is there benefit? 100% but it's only what people take out of it. But you know everyone who gets through group learned a lot about their offense because if not, you won't make it through.

P2: I would like to see the perspective change from assuming that everyone on the list is a child molester and focus more on what led to the crime that the individual committed and how can we help that person...more of a focus on rehabilitation

than on punishment. There needs to be more of a focus on mental health and the services that are available. Every sex offender is court ordered to participate in a mental health program, so the public should know that there is an effort being made to rehabilitate everyone who is added to the registry. The program really is geared to help you understand what led to the offense and how you can avoid reoffending, so once you graduate most people don't go on to reoffend. You learn empathy and decision making and have to reflect on your choices.

P5: Group is the biggest coping mechanism for me. Before I was required to do treatment, I never talked about my feelings or anything. I just bottled everything up and pretty much drank my feelings away, this is the best place to be able to open up.

P7: Rehabilitation is based on the Good Lives Model, which is working to create a balance between life, leisure, work, relationships, health and establishing goals in these areas. The treatment focuses on individuals who have poor coping skills and trying to reintegrate healthy things into their lives in order to be successful members of society. If you don't have anything to work toward, you're at risk of reoffending.

One participant relayed how the sex offender registry interfered with rehabilitation because it made the offender feel like there was no point in obtaining treatment. However, once this participants tier was reduced and he would no longer have to register forever, the rehabilitation was helpful to him.



P6: At first, I had to register as a Sexually Violent Predator (SVP), which meant that I would have to register for the rest of my life. Then, when the laws changed, I was dropped down to a tier 1 which meant that I wouldn't have to register forever. When I was labeled as an SVP, I didn't push myself through treatment because there was no point in doing my phase-work if I wouldn't ever get to leave. Now that I can get off the registry and I'm not required to stay in treatment forever, I'm taking my phase-work more seriously and trying a lot harder to complete my treatment. Being here in group does help though. Treatment has bettered my life.

Participants also explained how beneficial it was to discuss issues about being on the registry with other individuals who were required to register as sex offenders.

P4: Group is instrumental in helping people reacclimate. The treatment addresses the sex offender issue, but they also look at the whole life of the sex offender. You fill out a weekly log with what's going on in your life, then these issues can be addressed in group and people can get feedback from other group members. Like if someone is having trouble finding a job then the other group members can suggest places that are hiring and that type of thing. Nobody knows better than what sex offenders go through than a group full of sex offenders.

P1: The people in group are the only ones who really know what I'm going through. They know every horrible thing I've done. There is a brotherhood in here. Some of the shit that guys pour out in here is really eye opening. We laugh we joke, and we're there for each other. I feel like this is the one place that I can

open up and talk about the things that we've done and not be judged. No one is better than anyone else in here. I take a lot of comfort in that. It's definitely therapeutic.

P6: It is nice to be around other people who are going through what you're going through, so they understand how you're feeling, more than someone who doesn't.

One participant suggested that if the public was more aware of the rehabilitation requirement for registered sex offenders there might be less stigma associated with the sex offender label.

P5: The sex offender laws focus way more on punishment than rehabilitation. I had the option to join this counseling group to start rehabilitation when I first got convicted- before the whole court proceedings. They should give you the option to do some treatment and not have to go through sentencing. Try to be rehabilitated before you get thrown into jail or determine your sentence based on how successful you are at completing the treatment. I think if society knew about all the rehabilitation that we are required to complete, it would change their opinions of sex offenders.

### **Theme 6: Broken Family Relationships**

The theme of broken family relationships emerged when five of the ten participants described how being on the sex offender registry has impacted their relationships with family members. Each of these five participants explained that their family relationships have suffered as a result of the sex offender registry. Participants had to learn how to interact with their family members after being released from prison.

P1: So, like it was super difficult for me because my wife had to say something just joking around and it was not about being a sex offender or anything, but I was still like what did you say to me. I mean, you have to like almost shut off that switch so when it comes to is someone talking about me the first reaction is to handle that situation before it becomes something you can't handle. So, like to kind of tiptoe around things, it was really difficult.

P2: Two months after I got married is when everything came out. So, it split the family. Your first year of marriage is supposed to be your happiest and it was one of the worst.

P8: My dad didn't know how to interact with me after I got out. He made jokes about me finding a job and how I couldn't even work at McDonalds because who wants a sex offender giving their kid a happy meal. I didn't even know how to react to that comment...

Several participants also feared the impact that the sex offender registry would have on their children.

P5: I'm really worried about how to explain the registry to daughter and that it will impact her. One of my biggest fears is that one day she'll come home from school and say that someone saw me on the registry.

P2: Like, I have a daughter who I am trying to rebuild my relationship with, and she does gymnastics so I would love to be able to go to that stuff but obviously I can't. I mean, if you go by the letter of the law, technically if my wife is with me I could go because she is an adult approved by the board of probation but to me

it's just not worth the risk of someone seeing me there and finding out I'm on the registry and calling the cops- it's just not worth it

P1: We have a 7-year-old. You know our main concern, or her concern, was well if you did this, what could you potentially do in the future. I had to make sure that my wife knew that that isn't who I am or what defines me. I don't want my daughter growing up hearing the stereotypes of sex offenders and thinking that I'm a monster. My offense happened when I was 14, I've changed a lot since then.

Many of the participants have suffered from strain on their relationships or lost contact with family members as a result of being registered sex offenders.

P6: My wife and I just started to try to work things out a month ago. So, it's been several years of ups and downs. She wanted me to leave- I lived with her the entire time. The offense and the registry made it so she didn't want to be with me. Her family and friends all wanted her to leave me.

P8: Registering as a sex offender has completely broken my family. My kids won't talk to me- I have grand kids who I have never met. People assume that if you're on the registry, everything must be true. My kids won't come out and say it's because I'm a sex offender, but I know they don't want me around their kids. Even they buy into the stereotypes. Since I was convicted, I met my new wife and now have two kids. I love my family, but sometimes I feel guilty because I know that they'll suffer from me being on the registry. Sometimes I think it would be better for them if I wasn't around.

Two participants were even kept away from their children during important events because of the sex offender registry laws.

P5: When I had my daughter six months ago, that was something I didn't know about. When you're a registered sex offender, you have to tell the hospital when you get there. I didn't know that, but luckily my PO told me that I have to notify them that you're a registered sex offender. So, when I got there, I told them right off the bat and everything was fine. Then later the hospital director came down and said because of protocol, I was supposed to have a security officer in my room with me and my wife and my daughter at all times. I wasn't allowed to spend the night with my wife. My daughter was born at 9:01 at night and I had to leave by 11:00. I was treated like a visitor and not like my baby's father. So instead of worrying about my wife and my newborn child, I had to worry about notifying to proper people and making sure I'm still in compliance with the sex offender laws. When my wife was in labor, all I could think was what if she's not born by 11:00 and I have to leave. Instead of enjoying this special moment in my life, I had all this other stuff to worry about.

P1: It was actually really fucked up because when I came out, they said you can't see your daughter. Then I came here and they said once you get passed the 2nd phase, we'll give you permission for it. So, there's a guy in the group that basically was screwing around and not doing what he needed to do and every time we talked it was like a 4-hour thing, and I lost my shit. I was like you're holding me up from seeing my fucking kid. And it was right around Christmas time and I

called my PO and he didn't return my call. So, I didn't get to see my kid for Christmas. That was 2017. So, he came to my house and said yeah, I got your call, I'm sorry. You know what dude, make it right. So that week we had Christmas like a week later. I went and bought a bunch of shit for my kid and wrapped it all up and we had Christmas. But there were so many hoops I had to jump through. Because first I had to get into treatment and then I had to get to the end of the 2nd phase and then I had to do two visits up here with my wife and kid. Finally, I was like fuck it, I'm going to see my kid. I did everything in my power to do it, but you know.

### **Theme 7: Importance of Support System**

Five of the participants acknowledged the importance of the support system they had found once they were released from prison. Although some participants suffered from broken family relationships, several were able to connect with family members and relied on these family connections for support during reintegration.

P9: Having the support of family or a good support system is one of the best ways to promote positive reintegration from prison back to the community.

However, because of the nature of the offense, a lot of times there is an issue with the family, and they don't have the support system within the family. A lot of them do have family that supports them and maintain a normal life in spite of their label.

P2: I was lucky to have a lot of family support. I met my wife after I got out of prison and believe me, she didn't think she would end up marrying a man who

just got out of prison with a sex offense, but her family really rallied around me. I mean it's still crazy to me but her whole family has taken me in and gone out of their way to make me feel like part of the family. I have nine nieces and nephews and my sisters and their husbands have no problems with me. None of them have ever told me not to come around their kids. I definitely came into a situation where I had a ton of family support around me. And it obviously helps me, and I think it's important for people in this situation to have a lot of support

P1: I have a good deal of family support. Umm my offense involved my stepsister and my stepbrother. So, my mom, my sister, my stepdad and my two victims, I don't have any contact with them. I have one uncle I don't have contact with, but the rest of my family is still there. My grandparents, my aunts, her two kids are there. My wife, all of her family, they are all very supportive. I have a couple friends that we've been friends since we were teenagers. You know, always can rely on them.

Several participants moved in with family members and relied on family contacts for employment opportunities.

P1: You know, when I got out it was hard to find a job, so I fell back on my secondary career, which, I had been a cook for almost two decades. My family owned a restaurant, so ugh I got a job in that field.

P2: Also, families of sex offenders should know that sometimes filling out a bunch of applications and turning them in might not be the best way to get someone with a sex offense a job. So, if you can go to someone looking for a job

and vouch for the sex offender and ask if that person is willing to give them a chance, that is a better way to help them find employment.

P8: When I first got out, I lost my job because it was working with kids. I ended up moving in with the mother of a friend of mine. I helped take care of her and her house in exchange for room and board. I don't know what I would have done without her-probably swallowed a bullet. She was the only thing that kept me alive in the beginning... Later I met my wife and she is my support system. Because I couldn't find a job, she works and provides for me. I'm a house husband for our two kids, but it works well for us. I'm lucky to have such a supportive wife- a lot of guys going through this aren't that lucky.

Two participants found a strong support system from church groups.

P4: I started going to church right after I got out. My relationship with Jesus is much stronger now because of all of this process- those four years inside. I would not change my experience because of that. My understanding of a need of fellowship with a body of believers has been stronger since I've been out. The church has become my family. I've made sure that the pastoral staff and anyone with children knows that I'm a former offender.

P2: In my church there hasn't been one person who has judged me and about 75% of people know what my crime was. People let me around their kids and everything. I mean, I try to keep a good group of people around me



**Theme 8: Political Powerlessness**

The final theme arose when seven participants mentioned the political powerlessness they felt as a result of the sex offender registry. Among participants, there was a prevailing feeling that no politician would ever lessen the sex offender laws because sex offenders are easy targets for law makers.

P2: If you're someone who wants to be a career politician, you would never stand on a platform and say "I want to lessen the penalties for sex offenders" because you will never get elected or re-elected. That is a hard line in the sand that no one is ever going to cross. If someone does, then god bless them, but I don't ever see it happening. Other than, like the war on drugs, punishments getting so out of hand that it's ridiculous, then there is absolutely nothing that a politician could do. It's just too controversial to take on. I mean eventually, they could say that it just doesn't work, but it would be so unfavorable with voters because right now almost everyone in society can agree that sex offenders deserve harsh penalties. I think more likely police officers would have to get so tired of dealing with so many sex offenders coming in so often because the numbers keep going up and up and up that they would have to go to government and say that this doesn't work. It's not doing what in intended, were tracking people that we don't need to be tracking and were not decreasing crime. It would be different if when they created the registry that there was a noticeable decrease in crime, but that's not the case. So no, I don't think you will ever see a politician say we need to decrease the registry or lessen the punishment for sex offenders. But there would have to be

massive amount of research behind it saying that this is just costing us money and it's not doing the public any good, and even then you would have tremendous amounts of backlash and public outcry and as sad as it is to say, that is what is more important to politicians today-what the public thinks and not necessarily what the research supports especially with the social media. Now that people can get an alert on their phone every time someone new gets added to the registry, that information is just so much more available and it is made so public, that it would cause way too much backlash for anyone to try to do anything to help sex offenders. I just think the sad thing is that regardless of the research, reform is not something that is likely to happen. With public perception the way it is, politicians can't do anything to change it.

P4: In some cases, politicians, when it comes to anything law related or having to do with public safety, like to make a spectacle of themselves in advancing their own career. Look how tough I am on crime...when we all know, the sex offender registry shows you, this guy already did it, but it doesn't show you who else you should be concerned about. Because it's the ones you don't know that you should be the most concerned about- the coach, the teacher, the pastor at church, the ones that haven't committed any offense. Not the guy you already know about- he isn't as much of a threat as the ones that you don't know about. No politician would scale the registry back. Sex offending is a very sensitive issue and very fear inducing, so it won't be changed.

P5: No politicians would be willing to reduce the sex offender laws. They have the same stereotypes that everyone else does. NO one is going to stand up for a sex offender- they all assume the same things.

P7: During times of highly publicized crimes, legislators have a knee jerk reaction where law makers try to appease the masses without thinking about the individual. If more time was taken to come up with the best solution, it could benefit everybody. The Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act and Megan's Law were both in response to something terrible, so it would be nice to see a law that's not in response to something but considers all the sides.

There were also several participants who offered ways that they would change the sex offender laws. One change cited by participants was that the sex offender registry should not be public, but that law enforcement should have access to the information. They argued that if people wanted to know the information about who has been convicted of sex crimes, they should have to seek that information out from law enforcement.

P1: The registry is the most useless thing. You know who should have access to it? Law enforcement. I mean, I get it, you want to make sure little Suzie is safe when she's playing out on the sidewalk, but I'd be more worried about the guy who isn't listed on the registry. Because if something happened to a kid, the first person they're looking at is me.

P2: I feel like having a public registry isn't in the best interest for anybody for any crime. I mean, they could have a registry for law enforcement absolutely, but the public really doesn't need access to it. I think it was something that was birthed

out of fear and with the explosion of the justice system for prosecuting these crimes and the publicity that they've gained; it's not going to get any better. I like to compare it to the War on Drugs- it's not a war that they're going to win and they admitted that the war on drugs was a failure and it didn't accomplish anything but it resulted in locking up a bunch of people that probably didn't deserve to be locked up. I feel like you're going to see over time until they decide to move on to the next crime or group of people to target that they'll continue to increase the penalties for sex offenders. They'll increase the length of time that you have to be on the registry and the punishment will just get harsher until finally they realize that the registry isn't serving the purpose that they had intended

P3: Politicians are run by the people. Public opinion is generally for the registry. I don't have a problem with the registry, except for the public aspect of it. If people want to know the information on the registry, they should be able to request that information. But having that information public creates a panic among the public- it creates an attitude of stranger danger, but that's not the reality. Rarely is a sex offender a stranger to their victim.

P5: think that the sex offender registry shouldn't be plastered online. If you want to know, then you should be able to look it up.

There were also participants who argued that if convicting a sex crime resulted in being put on a public registry, then other felony crimes should have a required registry as well.

P2: In some ways I feel like if there is a registry for sex offenders that there should be a registry for other crimes. But since I don't think that the registry really does what it intended then I think other registries would be just as pointless. I mean, yeah it would be fair to make all felons register, but are you really going to be able to protect society from drug dealers or murderers? Like the sex offender registry, it comes down to just adding people to a list for the sake of adding people to a list.

P4: Why are sex offenders singled out as being the ones whose crimes need to be made public? Why not someone who committed a vehicle homicide or murdered his wife. Someone who used drugs or made meth in their home? I could go on and on. Why are sex offenders singled out? I could go on and on about how the sex offender registry furthers the career of politicians.

P1: I do hate that you got a dude that got busted for some coke. He does a couple years in jail and then after some counseling and probation, then they're free. A sex offender gets in trouble and ends up on the registry. He also gets put in jail, goes through the parole and rehabilitation, but he has at least 15 more years of punishment. It's like you end up punished twice for the same thing. I get that you want to keep the public safe, but why don't murderers or drug dealers have to register? I just think it is wrong to be punished so harshly for a crime. I mean, you're free but you're really not. If I'm not on parole, but if I can't make it to register in the next few hours, I'll go back to jail for 7 years. It just feels like a

trap to keep people in the system. I mean, there are people on the list for not paying child support, but no one cares about what you did, it's all about that label

Another argument is that the sex offender registry does not serve it's intended purpose of public safety, so there is no reason to have a public registry.

P1: I think that the registry can actually make guys more likely to reoffend.

People get that fuck-it attitude. Especially guys like me who look at it and see your picture on there. I mean, it's a good reality check, but when you have guys who can't get a job because of this website and people think you're a monster, then I'm going to show you what a monster is. It seems like the registry makes people feel like society has nothing for me, so I might as well go back to prison.

P2: I think that the people who view the registry regularly are just trying to see who is on there. In this Facebook age, people are just trying to gossip and have something interesting to post on their Facebook wall. I think that there are people who are actually trying to keep their kids safe, but I don't know that having a public registry actually does a lot for public safety in all reality. I think the intention is good, but I'm not sure that the registry is actually meeting that intention of what they want it to do. I mean studies show that most sex offenders aren't likely to reoffend anyway and that's not just me saying that, it's backed up by data and research. So, I feel like there are people who are trying to keep their children safe but more likely it's about gossip.

Another idea to change the registry was to offer a reevaluation after so many years without committing an offense or to have more thought go into who goes on the registry.

P10: The process right now is statutorily. You commit a certain offense, you're on the registry- Regardless of the elements that happened during the offense, if you're convicted of a certain crime you end the registry. You could be sexting teenagers, moon a school bus, pee in a park and end up on a registry. The process shouldn't be that you're put on the registry because of your conviction. But maybe through an evaluation you could determine whether an individual has certain philiias that make them a threat.

P2: There are people who will be on the registry for the rest of their life and will be in treatment for the rest of their life and people will label them even if they would otherwise be able to turn their life around. It should be a more fluid system where your parole officer and your treatment provider can see who is being rehabilitated, who is taking their treatment seriously, and who is likely to reoffend? Do these people really deserve to be on the registry for the rest of their lives if they are trying to better themselves and they've learned from their past mistakes? You can see in group whether what a person is saying matches up with their polygraph and what treatment standards show. Honestly it just feels like I'm being doubly punished from a crime that I'm not going to reoffend. For some people it's a life sentence.

P5: There should be some forgiveness with the sex offender registry. I'm 26 and I'll have to register for the rest of my life. If I go 25 years doing everything right, then maybe my case could be reviewed.

### **Composite Description of the Experience**

In order to finalize the data analysis for this phenomenological study, I focused on creating a composite description of the experience of individuals reintegrating into the community as registered sex offenders. According to Wertz et al (2011), it is important to convey qualitative research in a way that is meaningful to readers but also meets scientific standards of credibility, dependability, and confirmability. The goal of qualitative research is to create a shared understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, the researcher must synthesize the themes that were disclosed by each participant and determine the commonalities shared by the participants as a group. Each of the ten participants expressed that being required to register publicly as a sex offender had significant repercussions on their reintegration into the community. However, the number of years since each participants' release from prison did not determine the challenges experienced by the participants. As an example, P2 described obstacles that occurred since he was released two years ago, which were very similar to P4, who was released 12 years ago. Similarly, the length of the prison sentence did not have a significant effect on the experience of the participant. Participant 6 who was in prison for 3 months expressed similar difficulties as P2 who spent 6.5 years in prison.

Although reintegration is similar for registered sex offenders and other felons, there is a clear distinction for registered sex offenders that makes their transition back



into the community unique. Unlike other felons, individuals convicted of a sexual offense have their personal information stored on a public database for anyone to see. While employment and financial struggles are common among felons reintegrating to the community, the registry requirement makes finding employment particularly difficult for sex offenders. There are several jobs that sex offenders are not permitted to hold because of the clearances that are required. Additionally, one of the registry requirements for sex offenders is that they must disclose their employment address. Some employers are reluctant for the public to know that they employ a sex offender so are hesitant to hire these individuals.

Of the seven sex offender participants, five responded that they are employed, two are currently on disability, and one remains unemployed. Those who are employed were unable to find employment through the traditional means of applying, but instead relied on family members or church contacts to vouch for their credibility in order to secure employment. Additionally, those who were able to secure employment were unable to find jobs commensurate with their pre-prison occupations. Participant 8, who remains unemployed, previously worked in juvenile detention but was unable to return to work due to the required clearances. Participant 5 found employment but settled on a job making less than half of what he was making before he was imprisoned. Those participants who found employment described their jobs as manual labor, which they suggested were the only employers willing to hire sex offenders. This description of jobs held by sex offenders was echoed by the parole officer and counselor participants as well.

Low paying jobs or lack of gainful employment results in sex offenders' inability to advance their socioeconomic status. Participant 10 discussed the cycle of a sex offender who cannot get a job because of their offense and also gets denied for financial aid to get a higher education and how it holds these individuals at a low socio-economic status by disallowing them to better themselves by making them more viable to employers. The required treatment for sex offenders also exacerbated the financial struggles suffered by the participants. Participant 1 relayed that he had completed his required treatment but because of his current lack of employment and health insurance, he was unable to pay the balance off for the treatment. Because he is unable to pay, he is not allowed to graduate from the program. Therefore, they continue to charge him \$75 every week for treatment classes because he has to continue going until he can pay his balance, which just results in him getting further behind.

Like other felons, sex offenders struggle with the emotional and psychological burdens that accompany reintegration. However, individuals convicted of a sexual crime have the added burden of having their crimes highly publicized. Participants expressed how the public nature of their crimes increased the emotional and psychological trauma because of the increased fear of someone accusing them of wrongdoing, being physically targeted for their crime, and fear of accidentally breaking the registration rules. Not only is the information available publicly, but local news publishes the personal information and details of the crime to social media sites. Several participants noted how damaging it was to read comments about how sex offenders should all be killed or castrated and being labeled as *baby-rapers*, *kid-touchers*, *pedophiles*, or *pieces of shit*. The common

sentiment among participants was that they had already paid the price for their crime through prison time, but even after release they continue to pay for their mistakes.

Another reason participants expressed feeling stigmatized by society because of the sex offender registry was because being on the list elicits a negative response from society without anyone knowing the truth about the crime that got them put on the list. Participant 2 argued that society does not realize that there are a broad range of crimes that can get you added to the registry. However, when someone hears that a person is a registered sex offender, they automatically assume that person is a child molester, and not someone who urinated in public, flashed someone, got caught up in an unfortunate custody battle, or had a relationship with someone just a few years younger than themselves. People hear the term sex offender and associate with all sorts of negative labels without knowing the actual circumstances. As a result of the stigmatization by society, participants explained times when they were treated negatively by community members. Participant 4 was called out in public and called negative names. Another time he was told that he was not welcome in the community by his neighbors. Although there is no law prohibiting him from living in that location, a member of his community suggested they would make him leave.

Participants also expressed that there is a misconception that sex offenders are likely to reoffend and cannot be rehabilitated. Community members are often unaware that registered sex offenders are required to complete a treatment course that forces them to reflect on their crime and learn to prevent the red flags that led to their behaviors. The

rehabilitative counselors and parole officers echoed the idea that most sex offenders do successfully complete their treatment and are unlikely to reoffend.

Although there is some degree of stigmatization that targets all felons, sex offenders are in a unique situation where they are often viewed even more negatively than other felons. Participants explained that even in the prison system, there is a hierarchy with sex offenders being the lowest. Participant 6 stated that even though the majority of inmates were convicted of a sex crime, other felons still treated the sex offenders like garbage. In prison, other felons acted like they may be guilty of committing a crime, but at least they are not sex offender. Sex offenders have become a convenient scapegoat to represent the worst type of person.

As a result of the stigmatization, many participants expressed that they experienced a self-imposed social isolation. Many participants were afraid that if they went into public that someone might accuse them of something to get them sent back to prison. There were several participants who expressed that once you are labeled as a sex offender, anyone can accuse you of anything and because of that label, law enforcement will most likely assume they are telling the truth. Because of this fear, most participants expressed that they tend to keep to themselves and avoid public situations. Almost all of the participants stated that unless they are with someone they trust, like their spouse, they will not go out into public. They need someone there to have their back or else they would rather stay home than go out. This is different from most of the participants pre-prison lifestyle, as many described themselves as outgoing, spontaneous, and fearless.

However, the sex offender registry changed them into individuals who described themselves as paranoid, afraid, and anxious.

The paranoia and anxiety that most participants expressed led to other unresolved psychological and emotional factors. One of the primary fears that participants expressed was a fear of themselves or a family member being attacked because of the sex offender registry. The registry provides a public list of names and addresses of all registered sex offenders so it would be easy for someone to use that list to target these individuals. The counselor and parole officer participants reaffirmed this fear by stating incidents they have witnessed of individuals targeting sex offenders by harassing them or physically harming them.

Another fear that was held by several participants was accidentally breaking the rules of the registry. The law states that if any of the information on the registry changes, the sex offender has three days to update that information with law enforcement. Each of the participants stated that they try to make sure that everything is kept up to date but they worry that one day they will forget, or something will prevent them from registering on time. Others feared noncompliance because of not registering something they did not realize they were required to register. For instance, participant 5 knew that you had to register all your vehicles but did not know if snowmobiles counted as vehicles. Participant two went to prison before smart phones became popular. When he was released from prison, he unknowingly activated Facebook messenger, which he should have updated with law enforcement. Among participants, there was a pervasive fear of unintentionally

breaking the sex offender laws because it is so easy to get sent back to prison once you wear that label.

As a result of the fear and paranoia, some participants expressed inability to sleep, constant worry and looking over their shoulder, and an unending feeling of edginess. Participant 8 said that each time he got his registration paperwork in the mail, he would get sick to his stomach and the anxiety would not leave until he had completed his registration. It was so bad that he planned his wedding around when he would have to register so he wouldn't have that sick feeling during the wedding. It didn't make a difference for those who have been registering for years or were just released, the anxiety from registering was held by all participants.

One of the themes that surfaced during the interviews was the importance of rehabilitation. The participants expressed that they wish society understood that each individual convicted of a sexual offense is required to undergo treatment with certified rehabilitative counselors. The treatment has several phases that require the sex offender to learn empathy for their victim, understand the red flags that led to their crime, and learn ways to prevent them from reoffending. All of the participants noted how their treatment, which is referred to as *group*, was a positive factor in their lives. It was helpful for them to be in a group with other sex offenders because they felt like no one else really understood the implications of registering as a sex offender like other individuals on the registry.

Another theme that several participants expressed was the effects the sex offender registry had on their family relationships. Like other felons, participants had to be

reacclimated to their families when they were released from prison. For some, it was difficult to leave the prison mentality behind, which caused strain on family relationships. In addition to this strain, participants had the added difficulty of their families being impacted by the sex offender registry. Participants expressed fear that their family members would be physically targeted, or their children would be bullied as a result of the registry. There were also several participants who are unable to attend school functions or be alone with their children, which adds to the strained relationship. Participant 8 noted that he has no contact with 3 of his kids because he is a registered sex offender and they want nothing to do with him. Participant 1 missed Christmas with his daughter and participant 5 nearly missed the birth of his child because of the sex offender laws.

The irony of these strained or broken family relationships is that the counselors and parole officer participants agreed that forming strong positive relationships during reintegration is the main factor that reduces recidivism. However, they agreed that for sex offenders, it can be extremely difficult to form those positive relationships. Each of the participants noted that they were able to find a support system once they were released. Two participants relied on church to build those positive relationships, where the other participants found support systems in the family that stood by them even with the sex offender label.

For the majority of participants, these relationships were crucial for more than just positive support systems, as most relied on these relationships for housing and employment after their release. Participant 2 noted how difficult finding employment can

be without having someone to vouch for you as a good, hard working person. For sex offenders, the best way to get a job is not by completing and submitting a lot of job applications, but instead having a family member or friend help you find employment often yields better results. Without forming those positive relationships, many participants stated that they would be far worse off. Participant 8 said he contemplated suicide after his release, but he had a friend who gave him a place to stay and helping that friends' mom cook and clean gave him a purpose.

The final theme that emerged among participants was the theme of political powerlessness. Several participants noted how the current sex offender laws were birthed out of fear. When the sex offender laws were amended in 2012 to form the new Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act, it was the result of a highly publicized sex crime, so law makers reacted to the public outcry against sex offenders. Since that time, research has shown that registry may not be fulfilling its mission of public safety. However, participants agree that sex offenders remain an easy target for society and therefore, no politician would attempt to lessen the sex offender laws. Public opinion is what law makers tend to base their platforms on, and sex offenders remain highly unfavorable in society.

Participants did note ways that they might change the registry if they had the opportunity. Several participants stated that the registry could be just as useful if it was not public. Instead of the registry being easily accessible online, they suggested that law enforcement officers keep a registry that the public could view upon request. Those who suggested this reform stated that individuals who wanted to know this information for



public safety would still have access to this information, but it would lessen the impact of the registry being so accessible. Other participants argued that if there is a registry for felony and misdemeanor sex crimes that there should be a registry for all felons. Whereas other felons serve their sentence and then get to move on, sex offenders complete their sentence but then are often labeled for life. Unlike other felons, they are unable to put their crime behind them and move on with their lives. Lastly, there was a suggestion that the registry allow for some forgiveness. In Pennsylvania, there is not a system that allows an individual to move to a lower tier. The argument is that if you complete the required treatment and go an extended period of time without reoffending, you should be able get a reduced sentence, which could include dropping to a lower tier level. No data from this study was found to contradict the emergent themes.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand how SORNA impacts the process of reintegrating into society for individuals convicted of a sexual offense. The experiences of seven sex offenders, one rehabilitative counselor, and two parole officers were obtained through semi-structured, in person interviews, which served as the only method of data collections. From these interviews, significant statements were gathered to answer the research question.

In chapter 4 I provide an overview of the data collection setting, as well as the participant demographics. The participants for this qualitative study included seven registered sex offenders as well as three professionals who work closely with registered sex offenders. In chapter 4, I also provide an outline of the sampling method, primary

research question and two sub-questions, and the data analysis procedures. In order to analyze the data, I followed Moustakas's 7 steps for phenomenological research. Next, I show evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In chapter 4, I also revealed the themes that emerged from the data analysis as well as provide in depth narratives from the participants in order to answer the research question. Eight themes emerged from the participant responses, which included financial burdens and employment challenges, stigmatization by society, self-imposed social isolation, psychological and emotional burdens, importance of counseling, broken family relationships, the importance of family support, and political powerlessness.

The first theme, financial burdens and employment challenges, emerged when participants explained their experience finding gainful employment. Several participants found it difficult to secure employment and those who found jobs described them as manual labor. Additionally, the earnings from these jobs were far below their pre-prison earnings. Participants stated that their inability to find gainful employment was a direct result of their conviction, and several had to rely on friends and family in order to find a job at all. The second theme to emerge was the stigmatization that participants experienced as a result of their sex offender label, which was mentioned by all 10 participants. The participants experienced stigmatization as a result of Facebook and other social media and described the negative comments that society associates with sex offenders. Participants also explained how a lot of the stigmatization is a result of societal misunderstandings and detailed negative experiences they have suffered as a result of the stigma associated with sex offenders.

Social isolation was the third theme of this study. This theme emerged when seven participants explained their fear of social situations as a result of the sex offender registry. The fourth theme, psychological and emotional burdens relates to the previous theme and emerged when participants explained the paranoia, sleeplessness, depression, and anxiety they feel as registered sex offenders. Six participants described having unresolved psychological trauma now that they have the label of sex offender.

The fifth theme to emerge was the importance of rehabilitation, which was mentioned by seven participants. These individuals detailed how important it was to reflect on the conviction and be able to move forward with empathy and a better understanding of the red flags that led to the crime. Additionally, the participants noted that no one understood their situation better than other registered sex offenders, so it was nice to go through treatment with others experiencing the same situation. Broken family relationships, the sixth theme of this study, emerged when 5 participants detailed the negative impact that the sex offender registry has had on their relationships with family members. Conversely, the seventh theme was the importance of having a positive support system, which was stated by five participants. These individuals relied on family, church or friends for financial support, housing, and employment assistance. The eighth and final theme of political powerlessness emerged when seven participants noted how laws are based on public opinion and because sex offenders suffer from such severe stigmatization, no politician would be willing to lessen sex offender laws. The prevailing notion of this theme was that sex offenders serve as the lowest tier of society and will remain there based on societal misconceptions about sex offenders.

Chapter 5 shows the purpose and need of this qualitative study to increase the existing body of research on the lived experience of sex offenders reintegrating into society. In chapter 5, I offer an interpretation of the findings of the qualitative data as well as a comparison of the data collected during this study to the existing body of literature discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, I discuss the study's limitations, provide recommendations for further research, detail potential for social change, and connect the research to the theoretical framework. Lastly, I provide an overall conclusion of the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand how SORNA impacts the process of reintegrating into society for individuals convicted of a sexual offense. Researchers have mainly gathered and analyzed data to determine the effect of SORNA on reintegration from the perspective of law enforcement (e.g., Higgins & Rolfe, 2017; Werth, 2013). Studies on the lived experiences of sex offenders from their perspective and that of professionals who work closely with these individuals have been absent from the current literature. There was a need to fill this gap in the literature because sex offenders are the most directly affected by the SORNA legislation and therefore deserve for their voices to be heard on this subject. The goal of this study was to gain further understanding of the lived experience of sex offenders from their perspective and those who work professionally with sex offenders, to aid in the development of public policies that focus on reintegration for sex offenders.

I collected data for this phenomenological study through in-person, semi-structured interviews with seven sex offenders and three professionals who work closely with registered sex offenders. I chose these participants through purposive sampling of individuals who volunteered to be interviewed and met the study's criteria. To analyze the data, I used Moustakas's (1994) seven-step research analysis plan. During data analysis, eight themes emerged as a response to the central research question. These themes included financial burdens and employment challenges, stigmatization by society, self-imposed social isolation, psychological and emotional burdens, importance of

rehabilitation, broken relationships, importance of support system, and political powerlessness.

The findings from this phenomenological study describe the lived experience of sex offenders during their reintegration from prison back into their community. The findings revealed the participants' perspectives of how they are treated by society based on their status as sex offenders, as well as the unique psychological and emotional burdens that are associated with registering as a sex offender. The findings also indicate how, from the participants' perspective, the reintegration process was hindered by the sex offender registry.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The studies' findings generally validated the current peer-reviewed research literature that was included in Chapter 2. All 10 participants described the difficulty during the transition from prison back into the community. Reintegration can be difficult enough, but the participants expressed how the sex offender registry contributed to the emotional and psychological burden of reintegration. The purpose of this study was to determine the experiences of registered sex offenders as they reintegrate into society in order to explore the impact that the sex offender registry has on the reintegration process. The findings for this study and how they relate to the current literature on sex offenders and the reintegration process are summarized in this section. I also interpret this study's findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

**Theme 1: Financial Burdens and Employment Challenges**

There was an agreement among participants that they experienced substantial employment challenges after their release from prison as a result of the sex offender registry. These employment challenges subsequently led to financial burdens expressed by several participants. Similar to other ex-convicts, participants described the unwillingness of employers to hire individuals with a criminal record (Visher et al., 2013). Participants confirmed Roselli and Jeglic's (2017) findings by emphasizing the difficulty in obtaining gainful employment and by sharing how they had lost their previous employment because of their placement on the sex offender registry.

Several participants described the difficulty during their job search process and how the sex offender registry led to employers refusing to hire them. The unwillingness of employers to hire registered sex offenders is echoed in other studies that explore the impact of the sex offender registry on employment (Fox, 2015; Nally et al., 2014). Even jobs that sex offenders are allowed to work, which do not include any job involving children, older adults, or people with disabilities, can be challenging to obtain because of employer bias against individuals on the sex offender registry. The financial burden for participants also stemmed from the type of employment they were able to obtain, as many indicated that they were working manual labor jobs for significantly lower wages than they had been earning prior to their conviction. These findings confirm the quantitative study conducted by Alvarez and Loureiro (2012) who found that individuals with a criminal record are often unable to find employment that pays above minimum wage.

The employment struggles of the participants in this study confirmed the existing research on post prison life for registered sex offenders. Many employers are unwilling to hire registered sex offenders because of the stigma associated with these individuals as well as the negative reaction of potential patrons (Bensel & Sample, 2017; Fox, 2015; Visser et al., 2013). The study's findings on employment and financial burdens and employment challenges of registered sex offenders also expand the existing body of literature by providing sex offenders' accounts of how they found employment; most found it difficult to secure employment by traditional means. Rather than completing and submitting job applications, the participants relied on word of mouth from friends and family to obtain employment. Participants confirmed that even if they did not reveal their sexual offense conviction on the application, they were denied employment during the interview once this information was revealed.

## **Theme 2: Stigmatization by Society**

The participants in this study all revealed stigmatization they have experienced from society. Participants expressed stigmatization in the form of being labeled as *pedophiles*, *monsters*, *boogey-men*, and *pieces of shit*. They argued that even though society did not know the specific story related to their conviction, the sex offender label comes with connotations of being a child molester. Although the public perception of a sex offender is that of a depraved child molester, there are many other crimes that are included on the sex offender registry that arguably do not constitute a future sexual threat, such as public urination, purchasing tobacco or alcohol for a minor, possessing child pornography, or taking a child across state lines when a custody hearing is pending



(Pfaff, 2016). The findings of this study mirror those of Rose (2017), who suggested that using one term to represent the wide-ranging list of offenses that require registration as a sex offender establishes a singular population instead of a diverse group of different crimes and risk levels. The results from this study confirm the existing body of literature that indicates that sex offenders are often stigmatized in society as the public nature of their offense leads to these individuals becoming labeled as *pedophiles* or *perverts* by their communities (Hunter et al., 2015; Visher & Travis, 2003) even if their offense did not involve minors or sexual assault (Rose, 2017; Visgaitis, 2011).

Several participants described interactions with members of their communities based on their status as registered sex offenders. Because of public perception and SORNA laws, sex offenders are faced with cultural stereotypes that become ingrained in their daily lives and make it difficult to lead meaningful lives that contribute to society (Bensel & Sample, 2017). Participants expressed that even years after their release from prison, they still faced stigmatization by members of society who know that they are on the sex offender registry. Because sex offenders are required to continuously update their information on the registry, there is an assumption that these individuals are still a threat, regardless of the crime they committed. This mirrors the study conducted by Bensel and Sample (2017) who determined that the standardized nature of SORNA contributes to society's belief that all sex offenders are dangerous, likely to reoffend, and in need of registration requirements and more strict surveillance than nonsexual offenders including robbers, drug dealers, and murders.

Pfaff (2016) explored how the 2004 prime-time television show, *To Catch a Predator*, which publicly aired sting operations that lured strangers into attempting to have sexual relations with minors, contributed to the stigmatization of registered sex offenders. Participants further explained how social media sites, particularly Facebook, furthered the stigmatization that they faced. With social media, stories about an individual's conviction are even more widely spread and readers often post damaging comments, which spreads the negative connotations associated with the label of sex offender. Now the term sex offender has come to be associated with the idea of depraved predators that cannot help but to prey on children. However, because of the media attention surrounding sex offense cases, and the prevailing social construct that deems sex offenders are worthy of harsh punishments, sex offender laws continue to become more harsh and severe (Miller, 2014; Shultz, 2014).

The stigmatization described by this study's participants confirms a study conducted by Harris and Socia (2014). This experimental study compared 498 participants who were asked to rank their agreement with certain statements that used the sex offender label compared to a control group that was given the same statements with more neutral terms and found that when the sex offender label was used, there was an increase in support for harsh public policies including required registration and residency restrictions as well as a prevailing opinion that the individuals who were labeled as sex offenders were likely to reoffend and resistant to rehabilitation (Harris & Socia, 2014).

**Theme 3: Social Isolation**

As a result of the stigmatization by society, many participants shared how they prefer to isolate themselves from society. Participants expressed how they rarely go into public places and rely on trusted friends and family members to shield them from society. Several participants stated that they are unwilling to even go to the grocery store alone out of fear that someone will recognize them from the registry. This self-imposed social isolation confirms Rose (2017) who suggested that the harsh registration requirements were designed to keep sex offenders isolated from society.

In a 2017 study conducted by Bensel and Sample, the researchers determined that the way society views a group has a dramatic impact on how that group views themselves. Therefore, Bensel and Sample (2017) suggest that because society views and treats sex offenders as though they are dangerous and violent criminals, sex offenders are more likely to see themselves as outcasts from society and act accordingly. This study was confirmed when the participants admitted that they often choose to withdraw from the communities that treat them like outcasts.

Participants' social isolation confirms the previous research findings of Jenkins (2014), who suggested that previously incarcerated individuals are burdened by the fear of being accused of a crime and returning to the prison system. For the sex offender participants, this study was confirmed, as several mentioned the persistent fear that someone will falsely accuse them of a sexual crime or of neglecting the rules of the registry. In an effort to avoid any opportunity for someone to make an accusation against

them, they preferred to avoid situations where they would be around people who they felt they could not trust.

#### **Theme 4: Psychological and Emotional Burdens**

Participants had several unresolved emotional and psychological factors as a result of being on the sex offender registry. They expressed the fear, anxiety, paranoia, insomnia, and lack of confidence that they feel because of the sex offender label. Bitna et al. (2016) suggest that the stigmatization that sex offenders feel often leads to isolation, shame, depression, and apprehension over the public registry requirement. Additionally, these negative labels caused by the sex offender registry can have a profound impact on recidivism, as the shame and isolation caused by attributing negative labels to an individual has been found to increase offender reoffense (Bitna et al., 2016; Prescott, 2016). Both the sex offender participants and the professionals who work with sex offenders cited situations where a sex offender returned to jail because they could not handle the burden of reintegrating with the sex offender registry requirement.

One of the primary fears expressed by participants was that they could go back to jail at any time. Several expressed that they felt like marked targets and law enforcement was just waiting to send them back for non-compliance. These fears echo the study conducted by Werth (2013), who interviewed California parole officers and found that the majority favor punitive policies and suggested that punitive legislation is necessary because criminals are motivated to stay out of jail because of the harsh punishments. Higgins and Rolfe (2017) found that probation and parole officers often treat offenders as dangerous and highly likely to re-offend. The premise of the punitive policies is that sex

offenders know that they are being watched, so they do not break any rules out of fear of going back to prison for a parole violation. However, these punitive practices often lead to parole officers strictly supervising their parolees in order to catch criminals breaking the rules of their parole rather than helping them transition to society (Bitna et al., 2016; Werth, 2013). The sex offenders who participated were aware of the negative opinion many law enforcement officers held toward them. These participants expressed that while the fear of going back to prison did motivate them to make sure they did not reoffend, the fear of accidentally reoffending due to noncompliance with the registry was a huge psychological burden that they carried every day.

Another psychological burden expressed by participants was the fear that they would be targeted because of their status as a sex offender. Several participants stated that because their home address, vehicle, and employment address were all public, it would not be difficult for someone to use this information to harass them or cause them harm. A study conducted by Roselli and Jeglic (2017) found that only 17 percent of the people who viewed the sex offender registry were doing so in an effort to promote public safety. The implication is that the majority of people who view the registry are doing so out of curiosity, to promote gossip, or to cause emotional or psychological harm to those listed on the site. While the study did not detail any physical harm inflicted on sex offenders as a result of the registry, this remains a constant source of paranoia for participants.

**Theme 5: Importance of Rehabilitation**

A majority of participants expressed how important their rehabilitation was to their successful reintegration. When asked what the most important factor to successful reintegration, one participant mentioned the good lives model and how the current sex offender treatment relies on this method. The good lives model focuses on rehabilitating offenders and promoting a successful reintegration through employment, positive relationships, and positive self-reflection.

Although each sex offender convicted in Pennsylvania is required to complete the sex offender treatment program, they are still required to register as sex offenders for the length of time specified by their tier. This rehabilitative program relies on cognitive behavioral therapy, which focuses on thoughts and actions that lead to inappropriate behaviors and helps offenders develop competencies in recognizing internal and external risks in order to maintain appropriate behaviors (Kim et al., 2016). Each participant agreed that the treatment, which focuses on personal reflection to determine the red flags each individual has and the choices that led to their offense, was more beneficial to their successful reintegration than registering as a sex offender. This echoes Duwe (2015), who determined that offering treatment to rehabilitate sex offenders during the reintegration process is more successful than harsh disciplinary measures that rely on publicly categorizing sex offenders, which creates a stigma that follows the offender. Handler (2011) also suggested that sex offender legislation should rely on providing resources and behavioral treatment rather than public notification, which leads to feelings of shame and isolation among offenders.

Several participants responded that the treatment program was particularly beneficial because it became a support system of other individuals who understood the struggle of registering as a sex offender. Shultz (2014) conducted a study on the Good Lives Model, which focuses on treatment for sex offenders rather than an ongoing punishment. This study found that reliance on treatment and having a strong support system ultimately resulted in a decrease in recidivism by helping these individuals become contributing members of society. Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) determined that reintegrative shaming, which condemns the offense while showing respect for the individual convicted of that offense is the most promising method to promote successful reintegration. The participants of the study explained how society believes they are unable to be rehabilitated and therefore, they deserve overly harsh punishment for their conviction, which confirms the current literature (Handler, 2011; Shultz, 2014). Participants also described the conviction process, which requires each individual of a sexual crime to be evaluated by a Sexual Offender Assessment Board that determines the likelihood of the offender to reoffend. Regardless of the determination, all sex offenders still have to register according to their tier.

#### **Theme 6: Broken Family Relationships**

Participants noted the strain that the sex offender registry has caused on their family relationships. Five of the participants explained that their family relationships have suffered as a result of the sex offender registry. According to research conducted by Rose (2017), a survey of 584 family members of registered sex offenders were negatively impacted by public sex offender registration and often faced harassment, stigmatization,

or the inability to continue positive relationships with the registered sex offender.

Participants confirmed this study by describing how they have lost contact with family members as a result of being registered sex offenders.

Participants also described the impact the sex offender registry has had on their relationship with minor children. Three participants explained how they were unable to attend school functions which put strain on their family relationships. This confirmed the study conducted by Higgins and Rolfe (2017), which suggested that sex offenders face harsh restrictions which negatively impacts their relationship with their children and other family members. Depending on the severity of the crime, registered sex offenders are often restricted from attending school functions, assisting with any clubs or teams, driving children to or from events, or participating in public events including Halloween celebrations.

Additionally, participants worried that their family members would face harassment or be threatened because of their relationship with a registered sex offender. Rose (2017) conducted a study that found that family members of sex offenders also report feeling stigmatization, depression, stress, frustration, and anger as a result of being associated with an individual on the public registry. Some participants admitted that they felt guilty for having positive family relationships because anybody in a relationship with a sex offender would ultimately face unwarranted harassment. Therefore, participants suggested that they had often thought it would be better on their family members if they broke those relationships.



**Theme 7: Importance of Support System**

Five of the participants acknowledged the importance of the support system they had once they were released from prison. Although some participants suffered from broken family relationships, several were able to connect with church groups or other family members and relied on these family connections for support during reintegration. The participants explained how instrumental their support system was to having feelings of normalcy during their reintegration. They stated that when it feels like everyone in society is against you, having a support system makes a significant difference. Fox (2015) determined that when community members participate in reintegration programs, it helps create a more positive reintegration experience for offenders. The theme of the importance of a support system also confirmed a study conducted by Roselli and Jeglic (2017) who found that allowing members of society to interact with sex offenders and help with treatment disavowed negative stereotypes that all sex offenders are predatory and dangerous.

The participants also stated that their inability to find employment and housing necessitated their reliance on a support system, as several participants moved in with family members and relied on family contacts for employment opportunities. Findings in this study relating to the importance of a support system confirmed the existing literature on the post prison experiences of registered sex offenders. The registry requirement causes barriers to successful reintegration by limiting the opportunities for offenders to rejoin the labor market, influencing the positive relationships held by offenders, and making it increasingly difficult to obtain safe housing and strong community membership

(Ackerman et al., 2013; Bratina, 2013; Miller, 2014; Prescott, 2016). The financial burden and inability to find adequate housing due to residency restrictions creates a situation where sex offenders are forced to depend on anyone willing to help during the reintegration process.

### **Theme 8: Political Powerlessness**

The final theme that arose when discussing the sex offender registry was the theme of political powerlessness. Among participants, there was a prevailing feeling that no politician would ever lessen the sex offender laws because sex offenders are easy targets for law makers. This theme confirms the current literature that suggests that negative societal perceptions of sex offenders will result in continuing punitive legislation instead of rehabilitative alternatives because it remains politically favorable (Denver et al., 2017; Harris & Socia, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Participants explained that society's opinions about sex offenders are based on highly publicized sexual crimes and lawmakers who want to appear "tough on crime" are willing to create punitive policies to satisfy the wants of voters. Rose (2017) suggests that the current sex offender laws address a growing problem perpetuated by public outcry and demonization of a targeted social group. However, because of the media attention surrounding child abduction cases and the prevailing social construct that deems sex offenders are worthy of harsh punishments, communities and public officials maintain that a sex offender registry is necessary because tracking sexual offenders will prevent these individuals from reoffending (Miller, 2014; Shultz, 2014).

There were also several participants who offered ways that they would change the sex offender laws. One change cited by participants was that the sex offender registry should not be public, but that law enforcement should have access to the information. They argued that if people wanted to know the information about who has been convicted of sex crimes, they should have to seek that information out from law enforcement. This mirrors a study by Roselli and Jeglic (2017) that found that other countries' sex offender registries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, and Japan are only used to aid law enforcement and the public is not granted free access to this information. Furthermore, in order to be placed on the sex offender registry, there must be a clear argument made about the threat that the individual poses to society beyond their original victim (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). The sex offender legislation utilized by these countries maintains the intention for community safety through law enforcement observation without relying on labeling and public registration as a sex offender.

Participants noted how much of society's opinions about sex offenders are based on misconceptions. If society was more willing to get to know the individual behind the sex offender label, they would not rely on stereotypes. The law enforcement and rehabilitative counselor participants also suggested that the closer they work with sex offenders the more they realize that they are not all bad people and the majority to not fit the stereotypes imposed by society. A study conducted by Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) of professionals working with sex offenders in the United Kingdom indicated that those closely involved with managing sex offenders did not agree with the stereotypes of sex offenders and felt that the sex offender registries contained too much personal

information and should not be available to the public. Another study conducted by Higgins and Rolfe (2017) determined that professionals who were directly involved with the treatment of sex offenders often held more positive views about these individuals than other professionals who did not work closely with sex offenders.

### **Interpretation of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The results of the study confirmed the theoretical framework that provided the basis for this study on sex offender reintegration, Goffman's (1963) social construction theory. As discussed in chapter 2, social construction theory refers to how public policy is influenced by positive or negative societal characterization of target groups (Denver, Pickett, & Bushway, 2017; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The main idea of social construction theory suggests that the legislation affecting different groups is based on that groups' social construct. Therefore, policy makers are more inclined to provide beneficial legislation to the highest target populations. Conversely, punitive policies are given to the negatively constructed, deviant populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This theory relates to the experience of sex offenders during reintegration.

During this study, it became evident that the reintegration experience for registered sex offenders was dramatically impacted by the social deviant label imposed on them by society. Social construction theory suggests that individuals are classified into different groups in society based on their power and social construction (Sabetier & Weible, 2014). The highest group is considered most advantaged and represents those in society with power and a positive social construction. Alternatively, those in the lowest societal group are considered deviants, and include those with negative social constructs

and lacking political power (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). The deviant population, which includes sex offenders, receives more punitive public policy because public opinion usually considers this group as deserving punishment (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Once an individual is labeled as a deviant, it becomes part of the individual's social construction. Social construction theory relates to labeling theory as well by suggesting that the labels that are applied to target groups influence their social construction and consequent public policies (Denver et al., 2017).

Labeling an individual as a “sex offender” through mandatory registration promotes a negative social construction because of public stigmatization of those with this label and what the label implies (Denver et al., 2017; Harris & Socia, 2014). Research suggests that mandatory sex offender registration creates an “us versus them” mentality and leaves sex offenders ostracized from the rest of society because the registration process labels them as *sex offender* and consequently society places individuals with this label in a category of deserving harsh punishment (Rose, 2017). Labeling individuals who have been convicted of a sexual offense as *sex offenders* results in a stigmatization imposed by society. The fear, hostility, and negativity expressed toward sex offenders becomes a significant barrier to reintegration (Visher et al., 2013). Participants expressed feeling stigmatized by society because of the sex offender registry because being on the list elicits a negative response from society without anyone knowing the truth about the crime or the individual.

According to social construction theory, stigma is the social identity placed on individuals or a group by society (Goffman, 1963). This theory suggests that labeling a

group as deviants, or sex offenders in the present study, allows people to discriminate and stigmatize against these groups. Individuals in the higher social groups, those who possess the most power in society, justify their decisions regarding the lower groups based on their desire to remain in these social groups. The stigma imposed on individuals is what is used to frame that individual's identity, which for the deviant groups is through social rejection, dehumanization, dishonor, and stereotyping (Herek et al., 2013).

Participants in the current study confirmed a study by Asencio (2011) who determined that members of the deviant social constructs typically just accept the identities imposed on them by societal stigma. Participants described the negative labels that society has attributed to them, but the majority explained that there is no use arguing against these labels because there is no way of changing the views of society. Instead, they chose a self-imposed social isolation where they retreat from the stigma instead of trying to fight against it.

In the present study, the majority of participants expressed difficulty in obtaining gainful employment with earnings comparable to those earned prior to their conviction. This difficulty in procuring suitable employment has kept participants in a low socioeconomic standing. Because of the sex offender label and classification as deviants in society, the reintegration process was challenging for participants. The difficulties the participants experienced when trying to find gainful employment confirmed a study conducted by Roselli and Jeglic (2017), who interviewed 138 sex offenders and determined that over half lost their jobs as a result of their sex offender label. Additionally, participants described the obstacles to earning a college education once an

individual is on the sex offender registry. This makes it increasingly difficult to ever move beyond the low socioeconomic status held by the majority of sex offenders. The difficulty that participants had in obtaining employment and the subsequent low socioeconomic status is consistent with Goffard's (1963) social construction theory, which suggests that the dominant social groups in a society formulate social constructs, on which laws are predicated that marginalize deviants to keep them in a lower social construct.

Several participants expressed the unlikelihood of a politician lessening the punishment for sexual offenses. There was a concurrence among participants that because society believes that sex offenders are deserving of harsh penalties for their crime, no politician would be willing to go against these prevailing societal beliefs. This theme confirms the current literature that suggests that negative societal perceptions of sex offenders will result in continuing punitive legislation instead of rehabilitative alternatives because it remains politically favorable (Denver et al., 2017; Harris & Socia, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The ongoing feeling of political powerlessness expressed by participants relates to social construction theory, which suggests that those in power create harsh laws geared toward deviant populations in order to keep them powerless (Rose, 2017). The public outcry against sex offenders and the subsequent sex offender laws ensure the demonization of this social group as an effort to reduce political power held by the lowest social construct.

### **Limitations**

This study on sex offender reintegration provides an important contribution to the current literature on this subject. However, the study does have limitations that need to be addressed. The small sample size of 10 individuals was not representative of all sex offenders or professionals who work closely with sex offenders. Because the sample size included a limited number of participants, it cannot be considered generalizable to all sex offenders, law enforcement officers, or rehabilitative counselors. In an effort to lessen this limitation, the interviews continued until saturation occurred. Saturation was accomplished after the seventh interview when no new information or themes emerged (Roy et al. 2015). In order to reduce this limitation, I provided rich and detailed descriptions and contextual illustrations of the perceptions and experiences of the participants' accounts to improve the transferability of this study.

Another limitation includes the reliance on participant responses as the only means of data collection. In an effort to promote open, honest conversation, I used semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. Interview questions served as a guideline for interviews, but I asked follow up questions in order to garner more significant information on the actual lived experience of sex offenders during reintegration.

In order to ensure the credibility of the research data, I used respondent validation to verify that the data was representative of the actual lived experience of sex offenders. Furthermore, I transcribed participant responses verbatim and included rich, detailed responses to the open-ended interview questions in the data analysis to ensure that the data provided accurate descriptions of the phenomenon. I also implemented



triangulation to validate the findings of the study by interviewing participants from three different sources (registered sex offenders, rehabilitative counselors, and parole officers). Lastly, I compared emergent themes to the findings of other research studies on registered sex offenders.

A final limitation is researcher bias, but I took efforts to mitigate this limitation as much as possible. In addition to obtaining data directly from the individuals who experienced this phenomenon, I kept a journal of notes that helped me determine my own preconceptions of this phenomenon as a way to avoid placing my preconceived ideas ahead of those who are experts on their own lived experiences. By avoiding any reliance on preconceived ideas of the phenomenon, the research shows confirmability in that the findings are based solely on the interpretation of the data collected during the study. I carefully analyzed the data to ensure it was not skewed by researcher assumption or background experience that may have influenced the data collection and analysis.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Research**

This study was conducted to fill a gap in the current literature on the post prison reintegration experience of registered sex offenders. The sample for this study included seven registered sex offenders who have been released from prison for at least one year, and three professionals who have worked closely with registered sex offenders for one year or longer. The length of time since participants were released from prison ranged from two years to 12 years. The years working with registered sex offenders ranged from four to 14. The participants were all White and included eight males and two females.

The 10 participants all resided in a rural area of northwest Pennsylvania and provided their perceptions of the experience reintegrating into this community after prison.

The study was open to sex offenders in three rural counties in northwest Pennsylvania. Because the study relied on a specific rural area in Pennsylvania, the results may not be generalizable to the experiences of the overall population of sex offenders in Pennsylvania or outside of this state. Therefore, further research could be conducted to examine the reintegration experience of sex offenders outside these rural communities. Another limitation of this study was the exclusion of questions asking about the sex offenders' tier. Further studies could be conducted to include a comparison of the reintegration experience between sex offenders at a Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 as the registration requirement varies between the tiers. Future studies could also be conducted to examine a more diverse group of participants, as each of the sex offenders was a White male. Research could be expanded to female registered sex offenders to reduce this limitation. A more diverse sample of participants could reveal additional aspects of the phenomenon of reintegrating as a registered sex offender.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The participants in this study provided valuable insight into the damaging effects of the negative opinions and stereotypes that society members have about sex offenders. The descriptions of the lived experience of sex offenders will offer policymakers a deeper understanding of how stigma, labeling, and punitive policies negatively impact the reintegration experiences of sex offenders. This study offers the opportunity for positive social change through a deeper understanding of the obstacles faced by sex offenders

during reintegration and how stereotyping and stigmatization by society increase the emotional and psychological burden faced by these individuals. The descriptions offered by participants of their actual experience with the sex offender registry can provide direction for future research to enhance the post prison lived experience for sex offenders and ultimately reduce recidivism and promote successful reintegration.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

The focus of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of the required post incarceration registration from registered sex offenders, law enforcement, and rehabilitative counselors who work closely with sex offenders. Interviews with convicted sex offenders offered insight into this phenomenon from the perspective of those directly impacted by this policy. Additionally, interviews with law enforcement and sex offender therapists offered further insight into this phenomenon. Previous research into SORNA has not included qualitative studies that offer the insights of those required to register their personal information publicly. Therefore, the information gained from these interviews offers new insight into whether SORNA is the most effective policy to maintain community safety, avoid recidivism, and facilitate successful offender reintegration (Hunter et al., 2015; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2013).

This study has potential for positive social change by adding to the body of literature on sex offender reintegration and the implications of registration and notification, which could change the way sex offender legislation is viewed. An

understanding of the phenomenon of sex offender reintegration could benefit sex offenders in their effort to successfully reintegrate into the community by forming positive relationships, obtaining satisfying careers, and finding suitable living arrangements. An emphasis on the post prison reintegration experience from the point of view of those with substantial knowledge on the subject could benefit lawmakers by revealing what facilitates or hinders successful transition from prison into society. Furthermore, offering a voice to the sex offender population may encourage future research that could be used to improve the reintegration experience for sex offenders. Findings from this study could promote positive social change by providing additional insight to policy makers and those in the criminal justice field to review the current sex offender laws.

The data collected from this study revealed some of the primary obstacles faced by registered sex offenders during reintegration. Participants revealed the burden of finding gainful employment, the stigmatization they face from society, the emotional and psychological burdens, and the social isolation. These insights have implications for positive social change because they highlight areas where sex offenders might need services to help promote successful reintegration. Providing job assistance and mental health services beyond the required treatment program could help assist sex offenders in their transition from prison into their communities.

**Methodological Implications**

An examination of the current literature on reintegration for registered sex offenders revealed that the studies into the actual lived experience of this population are limited. The phenomenological approach allowed for data collected directly from those experiencing the phenomenon of reintegrating from prison into the community as a registered sex offender. The methodological implication of this study is that the data analysis procedure allowed for the inclusion of in-depth descriptions of the lived experience of sex offenders after their release from prison. The data collection and analysis methods provided insight directly from the perspective of registered sex offenders and professionals who work closely with registered sex offenders to answer the research question.

**Theoretical Implications**

Asencio (2011) discussed the importance of developing personal understandings in order to reduce stereotypes in society. The data provided by the current study offers a deeper understanding of the lived experience of registered sex offenders during reintegration. This data combined with the theoretical framework of social construction theory provides a more comprehensive understanding of the stereotyping and stigmatization that occurs as a result of the sex offender registry. A major implication of this study is that social construction theory can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the social, emotional, and psychological needs of registered sex offenders and they reintegrate into the community. By applying social construction theory to the post prison

experience of sex offenders, there is an opportunity to determine the mental health implications of current sex offender policy.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the post prison experiences of registered sex offenders, one year or longer after their release from prison. The objective of the study was to fill a gap in the literature about this phenomenon exclusively from the perspective of registered sex offenders and professionals who work closely with registered sex offenders. The findings of this study were consistent with previous findings on the collateral damages of the sex offender registry and the impact the registry has on successful reintegration. The participants shared valuable descriptions into the post release difficulties they experienced while reintegrating into society.

The participants also provided substantial information about how the sex offender label and the concurrent stigma negatively affected their reintegration. Because of this label, the majority found it difficult to find employment and struggled with financial difficulties. Additionally, the participants also had to cope with psychological and emotional obstacles as a result of the sex offender label. The stigmatization that participants faced also led to strained relationships with friends and family and a self-imposed social isolation. As the participants expressed, many sex offenders prefer to isolate themselves from everyone than risk being accused of something that will send them back to prison or face the indignity of society's stereotypes.

Because of society's stigmatization, the majority of participants found solace in the mandatory rehabilitation program. This treatment is completed in a group with other

registered sex offenders and requires those convicted of a sexual offense to reflect on the decisions that led to the offense in order to recognize red flags in the decision-making process to avoid reoffence. Participants found treatment to be a positive support system because no one else is able to understand the immense psychological and emotional burdens that the registry entails better than another person experiencing the same obstacles.

The participants' descriptions of reintegration as a registered sex offender are supported by Goffman's (1963) social construction theory. The stigma associated with the deviant label of sex offenders defines this group's social construct. Because sex offenders are viewed as deviants by society, they receive more punitive public policy because public opinion usually considers this group as deserving punishment (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Participants also noted the political powerlessness they feel as a result of the sex offender label. In previous studies of public attitudes about sex offenders, it was clear that public fear of sex offenders is high (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Society's impact on criminal justice policy can be seen through the enactment of sex offender registration laws. Based on the overwhelming public support of harsher sex offender legislation, punitive laws were passed by legislators to appease their constituents (Werth, 2013). Participants echoed this idea by suggesting that no politician would consider reducing the punitive sex offender laws because that would be unpopular with voters.

The purpose of this study was accomplished by providing the seven registered sex offenders and three professionals who work in a close capacity with sex offenders a voice

to describe the reintegration process and how it is impacted by the sex offender registry.

The information shared by the participants will add to the literature regarding sex offender reintegration. It is hoped that this study will provide more information to policy makers about the collateral consequences of the sex offender registry and the importance of rehabilitation for individuals convicted of a sexual offense. Additionally, it is hoped that the findings from this study will promote job training, educational assistance, and ongoing mental health services for individuals reintegrating into society as registered sex offenders.



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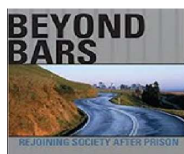
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## Appendix A: Invitation to Participate Flyer (Reintegrating Individuals)

### INTRODUCING A RESEARCH STUDY FOR REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS RE-ENTERING RURAL PENNSYLVANIA



As of 2018, approximately 17,000 individuals were required to register as sex offenders in Pennsylvania. Although these individuals served their sentence, they are still required to comply with mandatory registration requirements. Some adjust to life after prison, but others experience difficulties rebuilding their lives because of the registry requirement.

#### ***WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO YOU?***

If you have been required to register as a sex offender for one year or longer, you are invited to join a confidential research study conducted by Stephanie Rose, a doctoral student at Walden University.

The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the post-prison experiences from those who are required to register as sex offenders. In other words, this study will provide you the opportunity to tell your story about how the sex offender registry has impacted your reintegration to society.

#### **ALL INFORMATION WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL AND USED ONLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS AFTER THEIR RELEASE FROM PRISON.**

Your participation is voluntary, and you can discontinue your participation at any time during the interview process. **Your participation in this study will be conducted through in-person interviews.** There is no monetary compensation for participating in this study, but your participation in the study will help to advance our understanding of the post prison experiences of registered sex offenders.

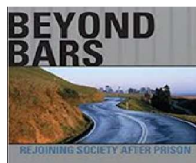
If you decide to participate in this study, you can contact the researcher via the email or telephone number provided at the end of this flyer. At that time, you will be given further details of how this confidential study will be conducted.

Stephanie Rose

◆ Telephone: [redacted] ◆ Email: [redacted]

*“This research is not sponsored by any organization or advocate group associated with registered sex offenders or any law enforcement organization.”*

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate Flyer (Professionals)  
**INTRODUCING A RESEARCH STUDY FOR REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS  
 RE-ENTERING RURAL PENNSYLVANIA**



As of 2018, approximately 17,000 individuals were required to register as sex offenders in Pennsylvania. Although these individuals served their sentence, they are still required to comply with mandatory registration requirements. Some adjust to life after prison, but others experience difficulties rebuilding their lives because of the registry requirement.

***WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO YOU?***

If you have worked professionally with individuals who are registered as sex offenders for one year or longer, you are invited to join a confidential research study conducted by Stephanie Rose, a doctoral student at Walden University.

The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the post-prison experiences from those who have close experience working with registered sex offenders. In other words, this study will provide you the opportunity to tell your story about how the sex offender registry has impacted the life of individuals reintegrating to society.

**ALL INFORMATION WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL AND USED ONLY  
 FOR THE PURPOSE OF UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF  
 REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS AFTER THEIR RELEASE FROM PRISON.**

Your participation is voluntary, and you can discontinue your participation at any time during the interview process. **Your participation in this study will be conducted through in-person interviews.** There is no monetary compensation for participating in this study, but your participation in the study will help to advance our understanding of the post prison experiences of registered sex offenders.

If you decide to participate in this study, you can contact the researcher via the email or telephone number provided at the end of this flyer. At that time, you will be given further details of how this confidential study will be conducted.

Stephanie Rose

♦ Telephone: [redacted] ♦ Email: [redacted]

*“This research is not sponsored by any organization or advocate group associated with registered sex offenders or any law enforcement organization.”*

## Appendix C: Screening Demographic Questionnaire (Reintegrating Individuals)

**What is Your Age/Category?**

- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 46-55
- ☐ 56-64
- ☐ 65 & Older

**What is your sex?**

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

**What is Your Race/Ethnicity?**

- ☐ African American/Black
- ☐ White
- ☐ Native or American Indian
- ☐ Asian/ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Other

**What year were you convicted?** \_\_\_\_\_

**How Long Were You in Prison?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Years

**How Long Have You Been Out of Prison?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Years

**Are you currently, or have you ever been, required to register as a sex offender in Pennsylvania?**

- ☐ Yes, I am currently required to register as a sex offender in Pennsylvania
- ☐ Yes, I have previously been required to register as a sex offender in Pennsylvania
- ☐ No

## Appendix D: Screening Demographic Questionnaire (Professionals)

**What is Your Age/Category?**

- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 46-55
- ☐ 56-64
- ☐ 65 & Older

**What is your sex?**

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

**What is Your Race/Ethnicity?**

- ☐ African American/Black
- ☐ White
- ☐ Native or American Indian
- ☐ Asian/ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Other

**How Long Have You Worked in a Professional Capacity with Registered Sex Offenders?**

- ☐ Years

## Appendix E: Interview Protocol (Reintegrating Individuals)

### *Opening Statement:*

I would like to begin by thanking you for volunteering to participate in my research study. This interview will be recorded. If at any time during the interview you would like to take a break or need to stop, please let me know. Do you have any questions about what I have just explained to you? Please let me know when it is okay for us to begin the interview.

### *Interview Questions*

1. How long were you imprisoned?
2. How long have you been released from prison?
3. What has your experience been like since you were released from prison?
4. Are you presently employed?
  - a. If yes, please explain your experience with finding a job.
  - b. If no, how do you feel the sex offender registry has impacted your ability to find a job?
5. What was your life like before you were imprisoned?
6. How is your life different than what it was like before you were imprisoned?
7. How would you describe your readjustment into society since your release from prison?
8. What major challenges and barriers, if any, have you faced since your release from prison?
9. Has your family life been impacted in any way, positive or negative as a result of the sex offender registry?
10. In what ways, if any, do you feel that the sex offender registry has impacted your reintegration into society?
11. How do you believe you, as a registered sex offender, have been treated by members of society since your release?
12. How do you believe you, as a registered sex offender, have been treated by law enforcement since your release?
13. What resources have assisted you to readjust into society since your release from prison?
14. What type of support do you believe is lacking for sex offenders after they are released from prison?
15. Can you explain your experience with the actual registration process?
16. What is the biggest burden you have experienced with the registration process?



17. What harm, if any, do you feel you have suffered as a result of the sex offender registry
18. What, if anything, would you change about the current sex offender laws?
19. Is there anything you would like to say to society about your experience with the sex offender registry?
20. Is there anything I have not asked you that you believe will provide a more complete picture of your experiences with reintegration as a registered sex offender?

*Closing Statement:*

Thank you for participating in my study. You have provided me with valuable information about the lived experience of registered sex offenders reintegrating into society. At this time, do you have any questions? I am very grateful for your time and contribution to my study.

## Appendix F: Interview Protocol (Professionals)

### *Opening Statement:*

I would like to begin by thanking you for volunteering to participate in my research study. This interview will be recorded. If at any time during the interview you would like to take a break or need to stop, please let me know. Do you have any questions about what I have just explained to you? Please let me know when it is okay for us to begin the interview.

### *Interview Questions*

1. Explain in what capacity you work with registered sex offenders.
2. How long have you been working in a professional capacity with registered sex offenders?
3. What do you think are the most important components to successful reintegration?
4. What services, if any, are available to help registered sex offenders reintegrate into society?
5. What type of support do you believe is lacking for individuals who are reintegrating after they are released from prison?
6. From your knowledge, what is the typical experience of sex offenders trying to obtain employment?
7. What are the biggest barriers that sex offenders experience when reintegrating into society?
8. How do you believe the sex offender registry has affected reintegration?
9. How do you believe society treats registered sex offenders?
10. Would you say that most of the sex offenders you work with do successfully reintegrate into society? Why or why not?
11. What, if anything, would you change about the current sex offender laws?
12. Is there anything I have not asked you that you believe will provide a more complete picture of your experiences with sex offender reintegration?

### *Closing Statement:*

Thank you for participating in my study. You have provided me with valuable information about the lived experience of registered sex offenders reintegrating into society. At this time, do you have any questions? I am very grateful for your time and contribution to my study.

## Appendix G: Invariant Constituents and Emerging Themes

Theme	Invariant constituents
Financial Burdens and Employment Challenges	a. Inability to find job in field (P3) b. Difficulty getting promoted in current job (P1) c. Inability to pay group/supervision fees (P1) d. Hard to find work due to rural area (P2). e. Relied on friends/family to find work (P2). f. Earning significantly less money than before (P5), g. Turned down because of conviction (P6), h. Struggling with unemployment (P7), i. Difficulty getting financial aid to go to college (P10).
Stigmatization by Society	a. Damaging effects of social media (P1,P3, P5,P6,P7,P9 ) b. Societal misconceptions (P2, P3,P4,P5,P6,P9) c. Labeling (P6, P10) d. Prison hierarchy (P3, P8)Community Incidents (P4, P8)
Self-Imposed Social Isolation	a. Fear of going back to prison (P1, P5, P8) b. Avoiding social situations (P1, P3, P6, P8) c. Withdrawing from society (P2, P6, P8).
Psychological and Emotional Burdens	a. Fear of targeting (P1, P3, P7) b. Worry about family's safety (P1), c. New anxiety (P1, P8), d. Fear of unintentional non-compliance (P1, P5, P6), e. Prison Mentality (P1), f. Fear of false accusations (P1, P2), g. Daily anxiety (P1, P6, P8).
Importance of Treatment	a. Self-reflection (P8) b. Inability to fake treatment (P1) c. Rehabilitation over punitive actions (P2) d. Discuss feelings (P5), e. Good Lives Model (P7), f. Registration's effect on treatment (P6), g. Brotherhood (P4, P1, P6), h. Public awareness (P5).
Broken Family Relationships	a. Difficulty with family interaction (P1), b. Divided family (P2), c. Family makes inappropriate comments (P8), d. Impact on children (P5, P1),e. Strained relationship with daughter (P2), f. Relationships with family members no longer exist (P6) g. Lack or no association with children/ grandchildren (P8) h. Almost missed birth of child (P5), i. Missing family events (P1).
Importance of Support System	a. Importance of family support (P9), b. Wife's family support (P2), c. Support from friends and family (P1), d. Relied on family for housing (P8), e. Employment through family business (P1), f. Importance of church (P4), g. No judgement at church (P2)
Political Powerlessness	a. Similarity to war on drugs (P1), b. Tough on crime stance (P2), c. Stereotypes (P5), d. Appeasing the masses (P7), Accessible by law enforcement only (P1, P2, P3, P7), e. Registry for other felons (P2, P4), f. More likely to reoffend (P1), Gossip (P2), g. Statutory offenses (P10), Revaluation (P2, P5).